

# FLEXIBLE FORCES: US GROUND FORCES IN FUTURE WAR

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**FLEXIBLE FORCES:  
US GROUND FORCES IN FUTURE WAR**

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The views expressed in this student academic research paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, Department of Health and Human Services, or the U.S. Government

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The matching of US ground forces structure to foreseeable missions is particularly complicated in the contemporary security environment. Most observers anticipate more sub-state and non-state activity, such as irregular warfare; but few dismiss the possibility of major interstate conflict. This raises an important question: should US ground forces be optimized for irregular warfare, or conventional battle? Strong arguments have been made to support each proposition. However, a close examination of the debate, its underlying assumptions, and the character of both conventional and irregular warfare shows the debate to center on a false dilemma. In fact, conventional and irregular war fighting have much more in common than not, and the differences that exist are mainly conceptual and mainly at higher echelons of command. The debate should be much less about the ground forces' structure than the method and particulars of their employment. This means that a flexible force can be created to adequately fight all manners of future wars. By making minor modifications to the current trajectory of US ground forces development, but major modifications to the training and education of our leadership cadres, it will be possible to create a force that can handle both conventional and irregular warfare.

## FLEXIBLE FORCES: US GROUND FORCES IN FUTURE WAR

### *Introduction*

American military planners today face particular challenges in designing future land forces. Our force is mainly designed to handle high-intensity, large-scale conventional warfare; however, the contemporary strategic environment seems to be increasingly posing challenges that are unconventional, smaller scale, and not fundamentally military at all.

Yet things are not so simple that we can simply design and create a force we believe to be appropriate. We start not from *tabula rasa*, but from an established organization whose equipment, personnel programs, and budgets constrain how much and how fast we can transform. Furthermore, the needed transformation will occur under fire; as this manuscript goes to press, the United States is engaged in two irregular wars that lend great urgency to our efforts. At the same time, these wars threaten to distort the result with the lens of the current fight;<sup>1</sup> we know that the changes made for current operations should not prejudice the future force that we see the security environment requiring of us. But that is where the complications begin, for it is not at all clear what the force should transform into.

The mismatch between our force's structure and its current mission has fostered a debate in military circles.<sup>2</sup> Those in the "traditionalist" camp generally believe the

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<sup>1</sup> Colin S. Gray calls this "presentism," a tendency for the pressing realities of the day to create the illusion that the current situation represents the most likely future eventuality, and that efforts to prepare for the former will also be the best for coping with the latter. See Gray's "Coping With Uncertainty: Dilemmas of Defense Planning," *Comparative Strategy*, 27: 324-331, pg. 326.

<sup>2</sup> This debate emerges in a wide variety and quickly growing number of fora. For an excellent distillation of the issues, see the "Point, Counterpoint" exchange between John Nagl and Gian P. Gentile in the 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2009 issue of *Joint Forces Quarterly* (John Nagl, "Let's Win The Wars We're In", *Joint Forces*

United States should continue to field land forces designed for high-intensity warfare. The “counterinsurgency” (or COIN) advocates believe we should create and field specialized counterinsurgency forces. A close examination of the debate will show that these arguments and their underlying conclusions are artificially polarized. Indeed, all forms of warfare share much more in common than in divergence. By focusing on these enduring features, we can find a third way to satisfy the competing demands of force planning and the contemporary security environment.

Both camps in the debate present their cases within the context of the current security environment, whose broad outlines they do not dispute. They agree that whereas for most of the past three hundred years international relations have been based on the interaction of nation-states, with their attendant rights to sovereignty and formal institutions, in the latter half of the Twentieth Century that paradigm seems to have shifted. Non-state actors, transnational threats and challenges, and the increasing pressures of non-national economic interdependency seem to have eroded the role of the traditional nation-state in security affairs. Some observers have gone so far as to predict the imminent demise of this three hundred-year old system;<sup>3</sup> others have observed that these trends seem to herald a decline in importance and frequency of major interstate warfare.<sup>4</sup>

This decline in the importance of interstate warfare is amplified by developments within the field of war fighting itself. The overwhelming capability of the United States

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*Quarterly*, Issue 52, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2009, pp. 20-26; and Gian P. Gentile, “Let’s Build An Army to Win All Wars,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Issue 52, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2009, pp. 27-33).

<sup>3</sup> William S. Lind, “Understanding Fourth Generation War,” January 15, 2004, accessed at <http://www.antiwar.com/lind/index.php?articleid=702> on 9 March 2009.

<sup>4</sup> The purveyors of this theory are so many that it has become a commonplace to make the observation. Some of the principal commenters on the military aspects of this phenomenon Lind (Ibid.) and Thomas X. Hammes (see for example, Hammes’ *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (St Paul, MN: Zenith, 2004).

in conventional war has made the prospect of challenging us unappealing to our potential adversaries. In essence, by becoming too good at one form of warfare, we have made it unlikely that we will engage in it.

So, broadly speaking, both camps agree that non-state participants are becoming increasingly important in international relations; that our prowess at conventional warfare has dissuaded most states from contemplating engaging us in it; and that as a consequence, state-on-state warfare is currently unlikely. But here the camps' understandings of the security environment part ways.

Traditionalists view the current state of the security environment as a temporary and passing exception. The complication of transnational issues and non-state actors may have made interstate relations more complex, but countries still tend to go to war over the Thucydidean triad of "honor, fear, and interest." Moreover, they contend that major interstate war is the only truly existential issue for most states; while transnational threats can damage a country's national interests, only conventional interstate war, designed to destroy another state's ability to resist, can be decisive. Therefore, argue the traditionalists, waging major interstate warfare is the essential task for a nation's army; other tasks may be desirable, but they are not fundamental.

Counterinsurgency advocates take their understanding of the security environment in another direction. They believe that the transition from a state-based system to a more complex environment is inevitable, irreversible, and fundamental. It has and will change our notions of what constitutes international politics, and insofar as war is driven by politics, the nature of war will shift accordingly.<sup>5</sup> In this environment, it will be not be

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<sup>5</sup> Hammes writes, "The fourth generation has arrived. It uses all available networks —political, economic, social, and military—to convince the enemy's political decision makers that their strategic goals are either

military forces but the will of decision makers that will become the target of “warfare;” some observers go so far as to predict the arrival of a new generation of warfare, one that sees the nature of warfare as a struggle of wills, and its character as a competition to shape perceptions.<sup>6</sup> Even those who don’t take the argument quite this far often claim that the proliferation of non-conventional means to attack strong nation states has made conventional warfare the last resort of any actor, rarely, if ever, to be seen.<sup>7</sup> Small wars, irregular fights, insurgencies, terrorism – this is the shape of future war, and a country that neglects this complicated new environment and continues to invest its treasure in conventional war fighting does so at great peril.

The differing views of these two groups drive them to different prescriptions for security policy. Traditionalists maintain that it is only by preparing for major interstate war that a country can guarantee its survival. First, it is only such war that can create an existential threat to a nation. Second, our dominance in conventional war is not permanent; turning the COIN advocates’ argument on its head, traditionalists point out that just as our dominance makes it unlikely that others will engage us in conventional combat, giving up that that dominance will invite conventional combat. The traditionalists do not present an all-or-nothing situation. They point out that by preparing for major conventional warfare an army hones the skills and acquires the equipment needed in any situation. Counterinsurgency and the other “stability operations” are in

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unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. Unlike previous generations, it does not attempt to win by defeating the enemy’s military forces. Instead, via the networks, it directly attacks the minds of the enemy decision makers to destroy the enemy’s political will.” Hammes, *Ibid.*, pg. 208.

<sup>6</sup> UK General (Retired) Sir Rupert Smith has coined the phrase “war among the people” to describe the “new” sort of war that has led to this phenomenon. Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent review of various assertions of a new generation of warfare, see Tim Benbow, “Talking ‘Bout Our Generation? Assessing the Concept of ‘Fourth Generation Warfare,’” *Comparative Strategy* (Vol. 27, No. 2) March-April 2008, pp. 148-163.



many ways a “lesser included capability” of major conventional combat.<sup>8</sup> The reverse is not true, however; a conventional army may be able to wage counterinsurgency, but a counterinsurgency army cannot wage major warfare. Therefore, it is critical to prepare the United States’ land forces for large scale warfare, and not specialize in counterinsurgency.

COIN advocates prescribe the opposite. They contend that the methods, concepts and exigencies of insurgency warfare are alien to conventional militaries, and are too complex to be adopted on-the-fly. Rather, an army that foresees extensive insurgency challenges must be prepared specifically for them. The force will require specialized organizations, specialized equipment, new theories of warfare, and special skills to counter insurgencies effectively and efficiently. The requirements of counterinsurgency are not a “lesser included capability” of major conventional warfare, and armies that have prepared for that have suffered enormously during the initial stages of counterinsurgency campaigns. COIN advocates see nothing on the security horizon that will require us to stage major conventional wars, and therefore believe that preparing for traditional war imposes significant real and opportunity costs.

### ***The Significance of the Debate***

These opposed prescriptions are not idly made, but rather are infused with a sense of urgency from both camps. COIN advocates point out the obvious: the Nation is in two irregular wars, and success is obligatory. Traditionalists look elsewhere, but find the

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<sup>8</sup> John Nagl introduces this important concept and terminology in *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*. This characterization of the traditional approach –and the institutional approach of the US Army- has shaped much of the debate in the past decade. See John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pg. \_\_\_\_\_.

same urgency. The Russian-Georgian war of 2008 has illustrated that major interstate warfare remains a distinct possibility; and since the choices of our potential adversaries are not only driven by calculations *vis-à-vis* the United States, but by their own bilateral calculations, as well, America's security interests could easily drag us into a conflict that begins as a bilateral conventional fight. Traditionalists observe that the efforts we have taken to win current conflicts are so extensive that we have left ourselves dangerously exposed in the field of foreseeable conventional warfare.

The debate contains a significance that goes beyond its urgency. Questions of magnitude make it undesirable to proceed without a coherent approach. The annual budget of the United States Army has grown significantly in recent years, and now comes to represent 25.1% of the defense budget, or \$140.7 Billion.<sup>9</sup> This is not an insignificant sum.

There is also the question of the risk to be assumed. Traditionalists and COIN advocates both believe the risk of wrongly structuring and posturing our landforces is existential. Major interstate warfare clearly poses such a threat. But the COIN advocates see risks in their scenario, too: a series of small wars, insurgencies, and irregular conflicts are just as likely to constrain American decision-making and ultimately force changes in our policies, institutions, and even our way of life. So, while the two camps may debate the way by which misinformed preparations for future wars can hurt our country, the sides agree that the magnitude of the problems that will face us should we get it wrong are unacceptable.

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<sup>9</sup> US Army News Release, "The Army Budget – Fiscal Year 2009," February 4, 2008. Accessed at <http://www.asafm.army.mil/budget/fybm/FY09/greentop.pdf> on 9 March 2009.

And we will not get too many chances to get it right. To conceive, to prepare and to raise a force is a time-intensive activity. During that time, the very threats being prepared for can emerge; there is no time to waste in beginning the force-planning cycle of anticipating requirements, designing a force, preparing it, fielding it, analyzing its performance, and modifying it. Getting it wrong might not just cost time, but the opportunity for another chance.

Executing this force development cycle while the very forces in question are being employed presents another challenge. The requirement to transform under fire increases the analytic bias in our efforts: we become more likely than ever to design forces for “the current war” rather than for the wars we anticipate.

Ironically, transforming under fire also increases the danger of preparing for the “last war,” and thereby being saddled with the wrong type of force. The fight of World War Two left us with the distinct understanding that modern warfare would be a very large scale mechanized fight (when not fought on a nuclear front), and the resultant military structures, equipment, doctrines, and personnel policies carried forward on momentum for years to come. The mid-century effort to transform the ground forces of the US for a nuclear battlefield –the so-called Pentomic Force—faltered and was eventually overwhelmed by the bureaucratic and cultural momentum that had developed in the Army.<sup>10</sup> Although the Army was created in a mold developed in the last war, and was now being employed in a cold war whose doctrines and policies clearly foresaw a significant probability of nuclear war, our understanding of our most recent past conflict prevented us from optimizing the force for new requirements.

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era: The US Army Between Korea and Vietnam* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1986); see especially Chapter 6, “Reaction and Rejection,” pp. 129-157.

Our landforce, like a ship, takes much money and time to change course, and once on course, is very difficult to turn. And if it cannot get to the shores we seek, the consequences for the country can be catastrophic. The significance of the current force planning debate is beyond question.

### ***Examining the Debate***

The nature of the debate is also important. We may argue about the ideal force to be fielded, but the problems of time, money and magnitude—as well as the pressing fact of current ongoing wars that we must win—affect our conclusions as well. We cannot wish away the force we currently have, nor can we stop using it and start over from scratch. This is less an argument about the perfect force, and more about how to transform our current force.

The debate on ground forces reform seems to be framed by three assumptions held in common by the two camps. First, both COIN advocates and traditionalists agree that it is unaffordable to create two forces, each specialized for a certain type of warfare. Second, they believe that it is possible to discern the nature of future warfare with enough precision to conduct accurate force design. Third, they agree that the requirements of each type of warfare are sufficiently distinct that a force specialized for one cannot effectively and efficiently wage the other. Therefore, both sides conclude that it is both possible and necessary to specialize our land forces; but because they have different visions of future war, they arrive at different conclusions about what that force should be.

Given the cost of standing military might, the first assumption seems solid. It would be difficult indeed to foresee affording two distinct forces. The US Army has historically focused on raising, training and sustaining combat and support formations to

wage large scale conventional war. The structure of those conventional forces has usually been driven by an assumed requirement to fight two major conflicts nearly simultaneously; to be able to fight only one war would create an unacceptable temptation for potential adversaries.<sup>11</sup> How big a war, or how many, is the subject of great debate during the development of strategy. Nevertheless, variations in proposed land force size have varied in degree, but not by orders of magnitude. The most severe “small army” proposals of this decade –the “transformation”-based ideas that floated around the Pentagon in 2001 and 2002-- suggested an Army of eight divisions, or twenty-four brigade combat teams.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the Army’s much-higher proposals foresaw a total of twelve divisions (or forty-eight brigade combat teams).<sup>13</sup> Most participants in the debate thought that something on the order of thirty-five brigade combat teams, approximately the status quo at the time, was necessary.<sup>14</sup>

In 2008 dollars, this fighting force cost over \$118 Billion per year to field and maintain.<sup>15</sup> To maintain a standing counterinsurgency force in addition to that force

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<sup>11</sup> For a good, if partisan, contemporaneous outline of the discussion see Frederick Kagan and William Kristol, “No Defense,” *The Weekly Standard*, July 23, 2001, pp. 11-13. The agonies surrounding the “force-sizing construct” debates and the accompanying risk assessments in the Pentagon of the early 2000s are well-known, and largely focused on these assumptions.

<sup>12</sup> Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor provide a good outline of the debate in this era in the Pentagon, placing it in the critical context of the Bush administration’s attempts to balance strategy and resources in the period before the attacks of 9/11 obviated their efforts. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon, 2006) pp. 7-10.

<sup>13</sup> General Eric Shinseki, US Army Chief of Staff, warned in his 2003 retirement speech against trying to execute a “twelve division strategy with a ten division Army,” explaining his opposition to further cuts below the then-strength of ten divisions. Thom Shanker, “New Strategy Vindicates Ex-Army Chief Shinseki,” *The New York Times*, 12 January 2007, accessed in New York Times OnLine Archive at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/12/washington/12shinseki.html> on 9 March 2009.

<sup>14</sup> If we assume a requirement to conduct two near-simultaneous conventional wars, and if we presume that our force leading up to 9/11 was adequate for such a strategy (a dubious assertion, given GEN Shinseki’s warnings noted above), our starting point can be 35-40 active duty combat brigades.

<sup>15</sup> In 2009, the Army’s total budget was \$140.7 billion; however, the cost for just the fighting force (Personnel, \$51.8 billion; Operations and Maintenance, \$40.2 billion; Procurement, \$24.6 billion; Army Family Housing, \$1.4 billion) totaled \$118 billion. This is a good, if not exact, approximation of the cost

would obviously cost more. If we take Operation Iraqi Freedom as a guide to determine the size of COIN force we might need, the costs rise rapidly. The United States is currently maintaining fifteen brigade combat teams on the ground in Iraq, and doing at a one-to-one ratio of deployed-to-nondeployed time is stressing the Army terribly.<sup>16</sup>

Assuming that we could in fact maintain a one-to-one deployment policy, we would need about thirty more brigade combat team equivalents for the COIN force -- *on top* of the forty brigades already required for conventional operations. That is, two reasonably sized specialized forces would require at least sixty-five brigade combat teams.<sup>17</sup> Assuming that the COIN units would be about as costly as a standard infantry brigade combat team, this additional force would cost \$95 billion dollars more than the \$140.7 billion that is required to sustain a total Army with a thirty-five BCT conventional fighting force.<sup>18</sup> In

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of fielding the standing force. US Army News Release, "The Army Budget – Fiscal Year 2009," February 4, 2008. Accessed at <http://www.asafm.army.mil/budget/fybm/FY09/greentop.pdf> on 9 March 2009.

<sup>16</sup> The stress of sustained operations is well-documented and commented upon. For an official view, see the 2008 Army Posture Statement. The Honorable Pete Geren and Chief of Staff General W. George Casey Jr. *A Statement on the Posture of the United States Army, 2008*, as submitted to the Committees and Subcommittees of the United States Senate and the House of Representatives of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, on 26 February 2008. See especially pp. 6-11.

<sup>17</sup> Some admittedly questionable assumptions underlie this discussion – but changing them does not change significantly the order of magnitude of the budget increases that would be needed to create a dual force. For example, the makeup of individual COIN units need not necessarily correspond to the organization of a BCT; a COIN unit optimized for COIN could conceivably be much slimmer than a BCT. But this also would not change the gross size of the force required for stability operations, which seems to be driven by the ratio of forces to population, not by the number of BCTs; counterinsurgency disagree on the exact ration, but seem to agree that it should be high, someplace on the order of 1:20 (Peter J.P. Krause, *Troop Levels in Stability Operations: What We Don't Know* (Cambridge: MIT Center for Studies of the Conventional Wisdom, February 2007). One could also question whether a COIN operation necessarily has to function on the rotational plan that has characterized the efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan; a single unit individual replacement program could work as well, and would require half the number of COIN brigades to be in the inventory. In this case, however, the savings would be somewhat diluted by the unlikelihood of soldiers in those COIN units taking more than one year terms at a time – meaning, there would continue to be nearly as many soldiers in the inventory, just organized into fewer units. Cutting the pizza into five slices instead of ten would not reduce too much of the cost of the pizza. Finally, changing the proportion of tooth to tail in COIN units would not obviate the requirement for sizable numbers of troops, whether specially trained or not. Therefore, it would seem that a COIN specific force would need to be of a similar size to the forces we currently have employed in counterinsurgencies.

<sup>18</sup> Figures for the total real costs of brigade combat teams are difficult to find. If one takes the incremental cost requested for the four brigades in the 2009 "Grow The Army" program (\$15.1 billion), the real costs of standing up brigades appear to be \$3.8 billion each. If we assume these costs are similar to the year-on-

the roughest numbers, this would mean an Army budget of more than *two hundred thirty billion* dollars.

Since the entire premise of a dual force is to have a COIN capability ready when needed, this dual force would need to be a standing force, available and ready even in times of peace. In the current time of war, the Army's record-setting 2009 budget request represents 1% of GDP.<sup>19</sup> The hypothetical double-force described above would cost 1.6% of GDP in peacetime. Defense spending as a percentage of GDP has fallen steadily since 1953, irrespective of war or peace.<sup>20</sup> Although the question of affordability is inherently subjective and political, history suggests we wouldn't pay the bill for two forces.

If the cost of two specialized forces would indeed be unaffordable, then we must consider what kind of specialized force to build. Here, another assumption governs the debate between those who would choose to create either high end conventional forces or specialized counterinsurgency forces: that the future of warfare is sufficiently predictable to plan forces.

The general trouble with prediction and forecasting has plagued force planners for years. Military and security sector planning is a field replete with examples of those who got it wrong. The British conclusion that the age of battleships was ending at the end of World War 1; or the US belief that radio and airplanes would usher in an era of

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year sustainment and operations costs, then the twenty-five additional brigades called for in this discussion would cost \$95 billion dollars per year.

<sup>19</sup> The 2009 Army budget request represents 1% of a US GDP of nearly \$4 trillion (see International Monetary Fund website, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2008; accessed at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/02/> on 15 March 2009).

<sup>20</sup> *Relative Size of Military Spending, 1940-2003*, accessed at <http://www.truthandpolitics.org/military-relative-size.php> on 15 March 2009.

“pushbutton warfare” in the 1940s<sup>21</sup> should give planners reason to doubt the certitude with which they view their own predictions. To think that our age has become any more predictable than other times in history is to defy the essentially human nature of warfare and interstate politics.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the very act of using history to predict the future can lead us to act in ways that bias its eventual outcome. By preparing for what we predict to be a potential enemy’s most likely course of action, for example, we can prompt him to adopt a different one.<sup>23</sup> In a competitive field such as military planning, prediction can lead to the unintended consequence of constantly moving your opponent’s plan away from the one for which you are planning.

There have been times when forecasting has been less problematic than others. For example, when foes declaratively and demonstrably intend to be adversaries, force planning comes down fairly simply to planning for that threat and handling others in the margins. The Cold War provided an excellent example of this sort of situation, in which the intentions of the adversary were announced, and his capabilities, which were mainly observable pieces of technology, could be discovered. Force planning came down to figuring how a known enemy would use a largely known force. Consequently, future scenarios became much more predictable, and force planning assumed a regularity and even routinization that carried through almost fifty years of East-West standoff. As we look into the future today, however, things become much murkier. We lack the

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) pg. 3.

<sup>22</sup> This argument is made most cogently by Colin Gray in a number of his recent works. See for example Colin Gray, *Another Bloody Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Colin Gray makes this point with an elegant turn of phrase in *Another Bloody Century*: “Defence decisions are taken today in order, one hopes, to reduce others’ options tomorrow...[T]he typical consequence has been armed conflict shaped significantly by the efforts of other countries who resist the roles they have been assigned.” Ibid, pg.44.



announced enemy whose capabilities and intentions can drive force planning. There are Iran and North Korea to be sure, as well as a scattering of other potential, minor states, but their strengths do not lie in conventional forces. These countries have the intention but lack the capabilities to make a force-based planning construct useful; to plan against them for major conventional war does not make sense from a military-technical standpoint. Likewise, there are non-state actors who have declared themselves our enemies, such as Al Qaeda. However, these sorts of enemies have inscrutable capabilities. Al Qaeda might indeed seek to attack us, but the breadth of military, non-military and semi-military means, methods and materials they would be willing to use defy a force planning construct. That is, prediction is more useful for some types of foe than for others, and predictable foes seem to be lacking. The second assumption, that we can predict the future sufficiently to plan future force structure, seems to be an idea fraught with dangers and pitfalls – and never more inutile than now.

An examination of the debate's assumptions suggests that the two camps are both right and wrong. Two forces are indeed unaffordable, but the future requirement is unpredictable. Therefore, the third assumption is critical: is it really true that one force can't handle the variety of warfare anticipated in the insurgency-conventional war split? This is the fundamental question underlying the entire debate, and it deserves significant treatment.

### ***Reframing the Debate***

The notion that specialization is necessary is rooted in our understanding of war itself. In the US Army, we divide the use of force up into various types of war. Moreover, we believe that there is a certain degree of both continuity and contiguity

among those types of war. We usually capture this idea in the device known as the “spectrum of conflict.” Although this depiction has changed somewhat over the years, it has always had a few things in common, and these things reveal to us the nature of our thoughts on war. On the left, or “lower” side of the spectrum is usually some form of operation short of all-out conventional warfare – variously called “low intensity conflict,” “operations other than war,” or any one of a number of names that suggest fighting is not the dominant characteristic of the situation (even though it may well be a necessary component of any treatment of the situation). Meanwhile, at the right end of the line, there is usually a notation of “major conventional warfare.” Between these two ends, there is a long area of completely contiguous space.<sup>24</sup>

This contiguity is the essential problem with the spectrum model. It suggests that the nature of conflict and its expression proceed in a linear fashion, that conflicts proceed from “low” intensity to high intensity, or slide back and forth along such a scale. This suggestion carries implications of its own – namely, that the techniques, weapons and organizations employed are arrayed in a similar linear progression. This places insurgency and major warfare at almost opposite ends of the spectrum – both in terms of the nature of the fight, as well as the weapons, techniques, and organizations employed. That is, the things we do in counterinsurgency are portrayed as polar opposites of the way we do things in conventional conflict. The spectrum model shows us that there is very little overlap between things at the low end and things at the high end of the spectrum. As a consequence, we tend to focus in our discussions on what is different between those

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<sup>24</sup> Actually, there is often “nuclear war,” but the implications of that form of war exceed the scope of this discussion. The US Army’s most recent version of the “spectrum” can be found in *Field Manual 3.0: Operations* (Washington DC: US Army, 2006), in “Chapter 2: The Continuum of Operations.”

two poles; not surprisingly, we find ourselves concluding that insurgency and major warfare have so much not in common that they require separate forces to wage them.

The spectrum oversimplifies the contemporary operating environment.<sup>25</sup> Conflict does not “slide” up and down a spectrum. Rather, it can exist simultaneously in several modes at once. World War II certainly involved high-end, conventional, mobile armored warfare; but it also contained insurgencies, such as Tito’s fight for Yugoslavia, and military-based guerilla warfare, such as the Soviet partisans who wrought havoc in the German rear during the eastern campaigns in 1942. Furthermore, World War II contained nuclear war, proxy war standoffs, and stability operations in vanquished areas. It would be hard indeed to fix World War II’s place on a “spectrum.” The same is true of World War I, when the focus on enormous set piece battles on the Western and Eastern fronts did not in any way preclude the simultaneous existence within the same war of a pure insurgency campaign waged by T.E. Lawrence and the Crown’s Arab allies against the Ottomans.

If a conflict can exist with characteristics evident from several points of a “spectrum” simultaneously, it is also true that those characteristics can come and go. Not only is it hard to fix a conflict on a “spectrum,” but were one able to do so -- it would move. In effect, an adversary has no requirement at all to “slide” progressively from one point on a spectrum to another; he can merely pick and choose from a range of tactics and

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<sup>25</sup> Variations on the spectrum idea have emerged lately, in an attempt to address the increasingly evident weaknesses of the spectrum model. Most recently, the Army’s new manual on stability operations avoids redefining the conflict spectrum entirely, and instead focuses on describing “operations in a full spectrum,” which it portrays as various potential combinations of “offense,” “defense,” and “stability.” This portrayal, while certainly adding to the utility of the older spectrum model, still fails to capture the full complexity of the issue. US Army, *Field Manual 3-07: Stability Operations* (Washington DC: US Army, October 2008), pg. 2-1.

techniques, as if from a smorgasbord. Furthermore, he can vary those techniques over time, or vary them geographically – or both.

This idea has been explored before. While Commandant of the Marine Corps in 1999, General Charles Krulak posited the idea of a “three-block war.”<sup>26</sup> He proposed that an adversary, or any situation, could simultaneously exhibit the characteristics of various points on the “spectrum” in nearly contiguous locations. On one block, there might be soldiers handing out foodstuffs in a humanitarian operation, while on another block, they might be conducting police-style work, and on yet another block, they might be engaged in a full fight to rout an armed group. Because no one could predict where which characteristics of war would appear, and since the situation in a given locale could change over time, a given unit could not predict with certainty what it would face – and a specialized unit would not be able to be directed into the proper conflict area at the right time. Krulak’s vision suggested that the entire force needed to be prepared to fight in any of these situations.

Frank Hoffman more recently has described a “new” style of warfare – “Hybrid War”-- in which combatants (especially the minor combatant) employ a variety of disparate techniques, from terrorism to propaganda to guerrilla warfare to conventional operations.<sup>27</sup> Hoffman sees the enemy selecting from a menu of options, completely unlimited by artificial distinctions about “modes of warfare” defined by positions on a spectrum. History would seem to prove Hoffman’s ideas right. He himself has focused extensively on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war, but many other examples support his thesis

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, January 1999, pg. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007).

and reinforce the examples shown above. In fact, the major criticism of Hoffman's argument is that he has described nothing new. Yet, few question his basic argument that war exists not as an expression of a spectrum, but rather as a smorgasbord of potential tactical and technical choices on the part of any number of belligerents.

Whereas a spectrum model for the differences among conflicts causes us to view them as separate phenomena existing only separately –and thus requiring specialized or distinct treatments—Krulak's and Hoffman's models stress the continuity among various types of war. A spectrum model leads us to focus on the differences between high-end and low-end warfare; a newer model invites us to find the commonalities.

To find commonalities, we can start by asking whether the differences are as significant as various factions maintain. These purported differences have been forcefully enumerated by COIN advocates: counterinsurgency is marked by the primacy of the political; the requirement to use discriminate force; the heavy use of information operations; an extensive civil affairs requirement; and the training, mentoring and integration of foreign forces into our operations. Traditionalists also point out differences, stressing the need to develop and employ various kinetic skills, such as marksmanship and artillery fire direction and gunnery; the need to master the complexities of high-level maneuver; and the need to see other, "softer," skills demanded by COIN advocates as optional, if useful, complements to essential kinetic skills. Traditionalists see COIN as a lesser included contingency of conventional warfighting; COIN advocates see something *sui generis* in COIN.

But are these differences really exclusive and definitive characteristics of these types of war? Are the differences cited in the debate truly fundamental differences?

That is, do the traditionalists and the COIN advocates describe an actual problem, or are they describing two straw men?

### ***Competing Strawmen***

A good place to start is with the arguments of the COIN specialists, whose advocacy of change in the American “way of war” has initiated the debate in the first place. And a good place to begin examining their understanding of the differences they see is with the “bible” of counterinsurgency studies, FM 3-24.<sup>28</sup> This doctrinal manual is almost unique in US Army history; it essentially took a minority (and self-styled “maverick”) view of US military practice, codified it as doctrine and handed it back to the military. In a sense, it was an outsider attempt to have doctrine drive operations, an all-too-rare occurrence in US military history. As an outsider’s doctrine, the authorship of the manual bears special attention: the drafting team included a large group of civilian specialists and academic authorities on the question of non-violent contributions to warfare, and counterinsurgency in general.<sup>29</sup> The manual may be considered to represent the “canon” of counterinsurgency knowledge.

The manual begins in its earliest pages to list the ways COIN differs from conventional war. It begins with a series of “principles of COIN” (as opposed to other forms of warfare), the first of which is that “legitimacy is the main objective.” The manual points out that this quest for legitimacy constrains the actions of the counterinsurgency force. But is this a characteristic exclusive to insurgency warfare? In

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<sup>28</sup> The series of principles and imperatives attributed henceforth in the text to “the manual” are enumerated in US Army, *Field Manual 3-24, Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC: US Army, December 2006), pp. 1-2- to 1-29, and are elaborated upon throughout the manual.

<sup>29</sup> Colin H. Kahl, “COIN of the Realm: Is There a Future for Counterinsurgency?”, *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2007, accessed at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20071101fareviewessay86612/colin-h-kahl/coin-of-the-realm.html> on 9 March 2009.

conventional wars it is assumed that the population of a given army supports its legitimacy. However, the struggle to establish legitimacy cannot be assumed away in conventional warfare as easily as the COIN advocates imply; although the gaining of legitimacy may not be an immediate goal in a conventional war, it is nevertheless fundamental. An army must maintain its legitimacy by operating in a way that the population appreciates. Its actions are constrained, much as in counterinsurgency, by the need to maintain the perception of legitimacy in the population that supports it. Furthermore, when an army wins in a conventional war, convincing the vanquished population of the legitimacy of the victory is critical. It is usually assumed that when an army is defeated in conventional warfare, the nation will capitulate. But conventional war has rarely been so clean. The conventional victories of the Grande Armée on the Iberian Peninsula did not convince the Spanish people to lay down their arms; they did not recognize the legitimacy of Napoleon's victory.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the Allies were deeply concerned that the German people might not accept the legitimacy of the Allies' victory, and might continue to resist. The Joint Chiefs of Staff issued JCS Directive 1067 in April 1945, instructing Eisenhower to convince the population to accept their army's defeat by treating them as a "defeated nation."<sup>31</sup> The quest for legitimacy may be different in insurgency and

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<sup>30</sup> Robert B. Asprey covers this point and puts it into the context of a burgeoning insurgency in his classic work on guerrilla warfare. Robert B. Asprey, *War In The Shadows: The Guerrilla In History* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), pp. 76-83.

<sup>31</sup> Paragraph 4 of JCS 1067 reads, "4. Basic Objectives of Military Government in Germany: a. It should be brought home to the Germans that Germany's ruthless warfare and the fanatical Nazi resistance have destroyed the German economy and made chaos and suffering inevitable and that the Germans cannot escape responsibility for what they have brought upon themselves. b. Germany will not be occupied for the purpose of liberation but as a defeated enemy nation. Your aim is not oppression but to occupy Germany for the purpose of realizing certain important Allied objectives. In the conduct of your occupation and administration you should be just but firm and aloof. You will strongly discourage fraternization with the

conventional war, but it is critical in all types of fighting in order to consolidate victory. Moreover, the constraints this quest for legitimacy places on forces exist in any type of war. COIN advocates suggest that the struggle for legitimacy is different in counterinsurgency because it must be considered at lower echelons of organization: in COIN, even private soldiers can destroy the population's perception of the legitimacy of a counterinsurgency force; whereas in conventional war that concern is reserved to higher command, and private soldiers can merely fight. But in reality, the difference is not so stark. Atrocities and maltreatment of the population were as important a factor in continued resistance in the post-Nazi Soviet occupied spaces, for instance, as anything else, and many of these atrocities were perpetrated spontaneously and at the lowest levels.<sup>32</sup> The struggle for legitimacy, then, seems to characterize both conventional and irregular warfare. Moreover, in both types of war, the consolidation of a victory, and indeed the establishment of a victory, is a convention that confers legitimacy on the victory; and without that, neither can be a win.<sup>33</sup> Legitimacy is the main objective in any form of war, and guides strategy, operations, and tactics. Traditionalists cannot ignore it any more than COIN specialists can claim it for their own.

The COIN manual goes on to tell us that in counterinsurgency, unity of effort is essential. This also is not unique to COIN warfare. In fact, the principles of war

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German officials and population. The principal Allied objective is to prevent Germany from ever again becoming a threat to the peace of the world. Essential steps in the accomplishment of this objective are the elimination of Nazism and militarism in all their forms, the immediate apprehension of war criminals for punishment, the industrial disarmament and demilitarization of Germany, with continuing control over Germany's capacity to make war, and the preparation for an eventual reconstruction of German political life on a democratic basis.” Accessed at [http://www.read-all-about-it.org/archive\\_english/german\\_losses/JCS\\_1067\\_0208.html](http://www.read-all-about-it.org/archive_english/german_losses/JCS_1067_0208.html) on 9 March 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Asprey gives a brief but illuminating sketch of how this happened in Ukraine. Asprey, pp. 324-326.

<sup>33</sup> Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 90-92.



enshrined by the US Army (and shared in part or *in toto* by so many other militaries since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) include “Unity of Command.” The counterinsurgency manual does make a distinction between unity of command and unity of effort, an effort to point out that it is rarely possible to achieve unity of command in the inherently interagency environment of counterinsurgency. But this is not so different from conventional war, especially at higher echelons. For example, when the Allies of the Second World War were unable to achieve unity of command, they frequently sought unity of effort; witness the coordinated but non-command relationships among the various fronts in the European Theater of Operations.

The manual also points out that “intelligence drives operations.” Of course, this is the case in conventional operations, as well. Intelligence-driven maneuver has been a goal of conventional warfare practitioners for almost a hundred years, since B.H. Liddell-Hart’s theories of the “expanding torrent of water” laid out the need for reconnaissance and probing to find the enemy’s weak points.<sup>34</sup> This tradition carried through the US military doctrines of “reconnaissance-pull” operations in the 1970s and 80s.<sup>35</sup> It is true that in conventional operations we not infrequently begin with offensive operations despite a paucity of information, but that is usually to begin to establish the information

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<sup>34</sup> Then-Captain B.H. Liddell-Hart gave a brilliant exposition of his theories on tactics and “fighting for information” in a presentation to the Royal United Services Institute in London in 1920. In the presentation, Hart used the metaphor of a “The Man In The Dark” to explain how a unit needed to find the enemy before it could destroy him, and the metaphor of an “Expanding Torrent” to describe how reconnaissance and probing should drive the selection and prosecution of directions of attack. See Captain B.H. Liddell-Hart, *The “Man-in-the-Dark” Theory of Infantry Tactics and the “Expanding Torrent” System of Attack*, presented on Wednesday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1920 and later published in *the Journal of the Royal United Services Institution* in February of 1921; accessed at [http://regimentalrogue.com/misc/liddell-hart\\_man\\_in\\_the\\_dark.html](http://regimentalrogue.com/misc/liddell-hart_man_in_the_dark.html) on 9 March 2009.

<sup>35</sup> William Lind coined the phrases “reconnaissance pull” and “reconnaissance push.” See William Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Boulder: Westview, 1985) pg. 18. The US military adopted these ideas: see United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Washington DC: Department of the Navy, 1997), “Chapter 4: The Conduct of War – Surfaces and Gaps,” pp. 92-106.

necessary to continue. The manual's elaboration that "sometimes in COIN we fight for information" suggests that counterinsurgency is no different; in fact, almost all operations begin not with information, but with a *search* for information. For example, in most modern doctrines, a force seeks to conduct deliberate attacks when it can; when there is insufficient information to support that level of precision in planning, however, the force conducts a "movement to contact" to gain and maintain contact with the enemy and thereby generate the information necessary to transition to a deliberate attack. This is conceptually no different from what is implied by the counterinsurgency manual's observation that "counterinsurgents' own actions are a key generator of intelligence." It is hard to see how this "principle" of counterinsurgency is practically different from conventional war or any other type of operation.

The COIN manual tells us that counterinsurgents must understand the environment. But this is certainly true in any sort of warfare. Admittedly, the nature of the information sought can be different, and more sociologically oriented, but the manual's admonition seems to be aimed at a straw man of conventional warfare – one that could only be true if conventional wars were fought on open billiard tabletops with no non-uniformed people running about on them whatsoever. And if the manual intends to emphasize that it is a different type of information that must be understood in COIN -- that too seems disputable. In reality, the motivations of enemy forces, their relationship to the population they are fighting among or around, their knowledge of the terrain and culture as it contributes to a home-field advantage – all of these are as important to a conventional commander as to a counterinsurgent commander. Indeed, when those features are ignored by conventional commanders, the result is not infrequently

battlefield defeat. Understanding all aspects of the battlefield is important in any kind of war.

The manual also tells us that COIN is different because in an insurgency, political factors are primary; in counterinsurgency all actions must contribute ultimately to a political outcome, because mere military defeat will not create victory by itself. But even in conventional war the possibility for an acceptable political outcome must be shaped by the force as time goes on. A battle that is fought with no regard given to its contribution to a political end state is indecisive in any type of war; American generals are famous for “winning the fight and squandering the victory.”<sup>36</sup> So in conventional war, too, action must be taken to further a political goal. Conversely, in counterinsurgency, there are times when the political goal requires a purely military approach. This fact, acknowledged on page 1-22 of the COIN manual, is perhaps best illustrated by the opinion of General David Petraeus that the purely kinetic striking of targets by special operations forces was a critical aspect of moving forward in the political solutions for the counterinsurgency in Iraq.<sup>37</sup>

The manual tells us that COIN requires a long-term commitment. “Long term” is a comparative term, and its meaning depends on who is considering the length of the term. At the lowest levels, long-term actions may be those that occur this week, or even today; surely such time horizons also exist at those same echelons in high-intensity combat. At low levels COIN operators must also think on a longer horizon, balancing the current

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew Bacevich illuminates in his relentless critique of General Tommy Franks’ memoir of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Andrew J. Bacevich, “A Modern Major General,” *The New Left Review*, September/October 2004, pp. 123-134.

<sup>37</sup> General (Retired) Barry McCaffrey, *After Action Report – Visit Iraq and Kuwait 5-11 December 2007*, accessed at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/iraqaardec2007.pdf> on 9 March 2009. The contribution of violent, kinetic activity to the success of the so-called Surge was also cited by David Kilcullen during a presentation at RAND’s Counterinsurgency Workshop, Arlington VA, April 2008.

operations against their long-term effects, in order to achieve smoother transitions as the campaign proceeds. But this is a conceptual distinction, and one that has less bearing than one might think on a daily basis; in any event, in high intensity war the same principle of considering the long-term consequences of short term actions can also apply. The concept of long-term commitment in COIN truly applies at the operational and strategic levels, where timelines differ greatly from the rapid operations that have characterized our approach to conventional warfare. So this principle does, indeed, distinguish conventional warfare from COIN, but only conceptually and at the highest levels.

The manual tells us that insurgents must be isolated from their cause and support. This again is a distinction that mainly applies at the higher levels of command. Separating insurgents requires foremost the proper allocation of effort of subordinate units on the part of operational level commanders. It is more about what effects we seek from our efforts than it is about what those efforts may be. Consequently, counterinsurgency units practice deterrent patrolling more often than the night attack; base defense and infrastructure protection more often than offense; psychological operations more often than kinetic operations. This is the greatest distinction between COIN and conventional war we have found so far. However, even here, the distinction remains mainly a matter of how and where a force is employed, not specifically what it does or how it is equipped. The low level skills required are mainly the same in any of the forms of warfare, and differ mainly in the amount of emphasis they require. The chief difference lies at the higher levels of organization, where the preparation and concept of operations is developed. And even the methods of keeping the enemy

separated from the people are rooted in the skills required for high intensity warfare: defense, attack, reconnaissance. So, while this distinction exists, it is not as significant at the lowest level as it is made to seem; however, it is significant at the higher levels of command, where the allocation of forces and the purpose of their employment is conceived.

The manual tells us that security under the rule of law is essential. This is indeed an activity that needs to be considered more carefully in COIN than in conventional war, and the things a force needs to do to create rule of law are significantly different from what it needs to do to win a conventional fight. However, this requirement tends to be concentrated at higher levels. At lower levels of organization, there is a significant overlap in the kinetic aspects of the effort (patrolling, after all, is patrolling). Also, the number of soldiers actually involved in the rule of law development activity is small, because the specific activities involved tend to be concentrated in specific units; the bulk of forces continue to perform standard security operations just as they would in any rear area operation, and which include a significant amount of conventional defense and offense. Frequently, however, this is a non-military job, better performed by police, and the execution of said tasks by the military is not, while common, fundamental.

The manual follows the principles by describing a series of COIN imperatives, again implying that these distinguish COIN from other forms of warfare. The manual tells us it is imperative to learn and adapt. COIN literature is replete with admonitions that counterinsurgency force must be a learning organization -- John Nagl focuses an entire book on this topic.<sup>38</sup> Counterinsurgency indeed does require a quickly evolving approach to counter a quickly evolving enemy. However, this is not unique to

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<sup>38</sup> Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife*.

counterinsurgency – in fact, the need to adapt has always been a feature of warfare: the side that can innovate faster than the other can execute will win. The United States Army developed a near-cult around the obligation to conduct “after action reviews” (AARs) during the 1980s, and established publishing organs such as the Center for Army Lessons Learned in order to capture and disseminate those lessons.<sup>39</sup> The culture of AARs was not limited to institutional development, but was injected into on-going operations; the central training centers developed to perfect US Army’s conventional warfighting in the 1980s used AARs during unit training periods with the intention to create a heuristic learning system that would produce improved performance within a fourteen-day unit rotation. And this, in the force most usually excoriated in COIN literature as being un-ready for COIN. Learning and adapting is hardly COIN specific.

The manual also tells us to support host nation efforts during COIN operations, implying that this is unique to counterinsurgency. This requirement is indeed *characteristic* of counterinsurgency, almost universally so, but it is not exclusive to insurgency warfare. In fact, supporting host nation –or allied-- governments in conventional wars is the norm, rather than the exception. World Wars I and II, Korea, the Gulf War - all involved significant coalitions that required constant management. Indeed, US doctrine for heavy war fighting singles out coalition warfare as an existing and anticipatable part of conventional warfare in the foreseeable future.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, each of

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<sup>39</sup> Gordon R. Sullivan, “Letter to the Army’s General Officers: Leaders for a Learning Organization, 25 March, 1994,” *Gordon R. Sullivan: The Collected Works of the Thirty-Second Chief of Staff, United States Army 1991-1995*, ed. Jerry R. Bolzak, published by United States Army, pp. 321-324. As Chief of Staff of the Army during the early 1990s, General Sullivan epitomized the central training center/AAR oriented Army.

<sup>40</sup> Current US Army doctrine admonishes the reader that coalition operations are unavoidable, and extols their benefits: see US Army, *Field Manual 3-0, Operations* (Washington DC: US Army, February 2008), sections 2-44 to 2-58. This approach is not new in the US Army; previous editions of the basic operations manual See for example US Army *Field Manual 100-5: Operations* (Washington DC: US Army, 1993),

these wars was fought on the territory of other countries, and involved governments whose ultimate survival was a key element of our campaign and a constant object of command attention. MacArthur's dealing with Sung Rhee in Korea; and Eisenhower's dealings first with the Allies and then with the governments of France and ultimately Germany, provide two examples of this. The requirement to support a host nation is hardly unique to counterinsurgency warfare.

Likewise empowerment of the lowest level, which the manual singles out as an imperative of COIN operations. It certainly can be, but while it is often necessary to decentralize many aspects of COIN, especially operations, it is not always the best approach for all aspects of counterinsurgency. For example, the learning organization imperative requires a centralized method of collecting, collating, and promulgating best practices across the force. Likewise, unity of message during information operations is critical, and can only be achieved through a certain centralization of message development. In fact, some COIN practitioners argue that knowing when and what to *centralize* in COIN is just as important as being willing and able to decentralize. Furthermore, decentralization is hardly unique to COIN. In conventional high intensity operations decentralization is a frequently used approach to operations –German *aufstragtaktik*, Liddell-Hart's "expanding torrent," the US Army doctrine of the 1980s,<sup>41</sup> and the US Marine Corps' adoption of "mission type orders"<sup>42</sup> all suggest that the

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"Chapter 5: Combined Operations," pp. 5-1 to 5-5. This pattern in doctrine existed even earlier, as can be seen in the 1982 version of the manual, "Chapter 17: Joint and Combined Operations," pp. 17-1 to 17-13.

<sup>41</sup> The "Air Land Battle" doctrine was founded on principles of mission tactics and decentralized execution. See United States Army, *Field Manual 100-5: Operations* (Washington DC: US Army, June, 1982). See also subsequent publications of the manual in 1986 and 1993, which reaffirmed the Army's commitment to mission tactics.

<sup>42</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Department of the Navy: Washington DC, 1997), pp. 87-88. This is not the earliest attempt on the Marines' part to decentralize: the first edition of *MCDPI*, published almost a full decade earlier, also advocated

requirement to decentralize in COIN operations –to the extent it exists- does not distinguish COIN from conventional warfare any more necessarily than centralization characterized high-intensity war and distinguishes it from COIN. Both are fallacious, limited views of the two modes of warfare.

This is as far as the manual takes us, but this is hardly the only part of the canon. In other for a, COIN advocates also instruct us to minimize the use of force, and suggest that this is a major difference between counterinsurgency and other types of warfare. But sometimes the best results in a counterinsurgency are achieved with a large use of force. Counterinsurgency doesn't really require a minimal use of force, but rather an appropriate use of force. This again is not unique to COIN warfare. Armies tuned to high-intensity warfare have long insisted -doctrinally and practically- that the right amount of force is required for all situations. Even at the height of the conventional army of the US Army in the 1990s, the concept of proportional use of force was a critical principle of targeting operations; the importance of not using force that created gratuitous damage that would have to be cleared later was stressed in doctrine, as was the notion that the destruction of critical infrastructure for operational purposes needed to be balanced against the need to use that infrastructure in future operations. In the United Kingdom, this doctrine of fighting conventional war with the appropriate level of force was elevated to a legal standard long before counterinsurgency became a normal concern. Captain Warrington, the ground commander during the Bristol Riots, was convicted at court martial of using insufficient force to put down the uprising; on the other hand, General Dyer's ruthless 1919 intimidation of a gathering at Amritsar, later to be known

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decentralized command, control and tactics. See United States Marine Corps, *Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1: Warfighting* (Department of the Navy: Washington DC, 1989), "Chapter 4: The Conduct of War."



as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, earned him a Committee inquiry that condemned his actions; relief of command; and public opprobrium.<sup>43</sup> The concept of sufficiency works both ways: it charges a commander both to use enough force but not too much. It is a far more sophisticated principle than using minimal force to achieve an objective, and applies equally to both COIN and conventional war.

Of course, the discussion about use of force is really less about the force used than the results. COIN advocates mean to suggest that excessive force causes collateral damage and casualties that offend those we would persuade to support the government, and thus hinder rather than help our cause; and thus the use of force must be minimized. While this is not untrue, it does not necessarily follow that using significant force causes greater destruction or collateral injury. It is also not necessarily true that all cases of collateral destruction outweigh the counterinsurgency benefit to be gained by the action causing the destruction. That can only be decided on a case-by-case basis. Each case does, however, always require moral justification. In this sense, the question of collateral damage is no different in COIN than it is in conventional war: it is impermissible to carelessly kill noncombatants or damage the patrimony and infrastructure of a country. Indeed, in conventional war we find itself under the same sorts of collateral damage avoidance as in COIN, and sometimes for the same reason, too: it is no easier to pacify an aggravated population than one that was well treated during the course of the fight.

The conceptual imperatives listed in the COIN manual drive very specific force structure recommendations from some COIN advocates. One of the main comments

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Townsend, "In the Aid of Civil Power," *Counterinsurgency in Modern Warfare*, ed. Daniel Marston and Carter Malkasian (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008) pp. 19-36. For proceedings of Captain Warrington's court martial, which recommended the cashiering of the captain, see *A Citizen, The Bristol Riots: Their Causes, Progress and Consequences* (London: Cadell, Strand, 1832).

regards the role of technology. HR McMaster tells us that a fetish with technology is a problem in a force that is going to be used for COIN.<sup>44</sup> A force that neglects the human dimensions of decision-making will find itself woefully unprepared for counterinsurgency. However, the argument is often misconstrued and stretched too far; some commentators reject the role of high technology in counterinsurgency warfare altogether, or suggest that the technology of high intensity warfare is not the sort of technology we require in counterinsurgency.<sup>45</sup> In reality, technology can be hugely important in COIN. At some point, an insurgent –by definition- turns to violent means. And those violent means include and require kinetic actions. And kinetic activity theoretically and practically mean physical movement that can (and must) be countered with, *inter alia*, technological means. The ODIN task force in Iraq provides a good recent example. Anti-coalition insurgents were using very simple, very low-technology improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to propagate the message that the Coalition was unable to secure either itself or the population against the violence of the insurgency. The Coalition assembled a very high-tech set of sensors and strike packages to begin focused, round-the-clock detection, interdiction and dismantlement of IEDs, naming the combined intelligence/operational/aerial task force ODIN (Observe, Detect, Interdict, Neutralize).<sup>46</sup> In a short period, this technologically-enabled force was able to accomplish what months and even years of low-tech effort could not – to reduce the role

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<sup>44</sup> H.R. McMaster, “Learning From Contemporary Conflicts to Prepare for Future War,” *Orbis*, Fall 2008, pp. 564-584. See especially McMaster’s comments on counterinsurgency on pages 573-575, and page 582.

<sup>45</sup> This skepticism of technological solutions is widely held in the literature, and does not bear repetition here. However, for an innovative and interesting treatment of the topic, see Victor Shiu Chaing Cheng, *Modern Military Technology in Counterinsurgency Warfare: The Experience of the Nationalist Army in the Chinese Civil War* (Sweden: Lund University, 2007).

<sup>46</sup> Thom Shanker, “At Odds With The Air Force, Army Adds Its Own Aviation Unit,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 2007, accessed at [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/washington/22military.html?\\_r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/22/washington/22military.html?_r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss) on 9 March 2009.

IEDs were playing in the enemy's efforts to discredit the Coalition. Technology is not anathema to a counterinsurgency fight; used properly, it can have a profound effect.

Some COIN advocates are very specific about force recommendations. Some complain that we need far more wheeled armored vehicles for COIN than a conventional force requires. However, this makes gross assumptions about the character of the counterinsurgency fight. Not all COIN operations lend themselves to armored wheeled vehicle operations, and some lend themselves very well to tanks. In 2006 in Najaf and in the Second Battle of Fallujah, the armor and precise firepower of the M1 Abrams made it a critical part of that part of counterinsurgency – which, not incidentally, greatly resembled “conventional war.” Of course, it is not untrue that COIN can frequently benefit from a less intrusive vehicle than a tank – but which one? The Army has quickly bought and deployed many MRAPs (“Mine Resistant Ambush Protected” wheeled troop carriers) to Iraq, responding to needs in-theater -- and precipitating cries that a real counterinsurgency force would have bought more MRAPs earlier.<sup>47</sup> But the vehicle is useless in many of the most contentious parts of Afghanistan, where the roads are poor or nonexistent, and can support neither the size nor the weight of the MRAP. Likewise, it is unlikely that MRAPs would have been very useful in Malaya or in much of Viet Nam. It is difficult to predict exactly what materiel we will need in counterinsurgency, because we don't know where those counterinsurgencies will be. What's more important is to focus on what we do know: we know that for COIN we can expect a requirement for some sort of armored utility vehicle. But we need that for high intensity operations, too. One of the lessons learned in the first Gulf War was that the

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<sup>47</sup> For an excellent analysis of the MRAP discussion vis-à-vis both Iraq and COIN in general, see Andrew F. Kripenevich and Dakota L. Wood, *Of IEDs and MRAPs: Force Protection in Complex Irregular Operations* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2007).

light-skinned reconnaissance units assigned to heavy brigades were not sufficiently robust to handle the fighting anticipated. Once confronted with this reality, most commanders opted to re-seat their scouts in Bradley's or to reassign them to rear duties, such as guarding operations centers.

Artillery also falls into the sights of COIN advocates when they discuss force structure. It is often stated that artillery is unhelpful and even counterproductive in COIN. But this again depends on the situation and the method of employment. Artillery fire in Northern Ireland did indeed not seem to be appropriate (or "sufficient") force. However, it is used to great effect in Afghanistan, where the rural nature of the fighting and the patterns of habitation and agriculture allow the physical segregation of combatants from the population and their subsequent destruction by fires with no danger of collateral injury to noncombatants and their property. Artillery can be useful and even necessary in COIN – just as it is often but not always useful in conventional war.

Likewise, airpower; just as with artillery, there are occasions and methods through which air strikes can be enormously useful, not only for the kinetic value of the strike, but for the precision of its effects. Airplanes and bombs don't ruin a counterinsurgency campaign; bad or thoughtless targeting does.

Some observers say that it is the physical tactics that determine the difference between irregular and conventional warfare. Not holding ground, not defending past the point of decisive engagement, using hit and run tactics, not fighting in close quarters – all have been cited as signs of insurgency warfare, as distinct from high intensity warfare.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The best example of this sort of analysis can be found in Stephen D. Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman's *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle PA: US Army Strategic Studies Institute, 2008). The authors conceive the question entirely in terms of the tactics and techniques of kinetic activity (e.g. giving vs. holding ground; hiding among the

But here again the “distinction” between the forms of war doesn’t stand up to close scrutiny. Frequently in insurgency warfare, guerrillas will hold ground and seek to protect it; this is the case when they defend havens, but also is an often-occurring aspect of guerrilla war. Witness the case of fighting in Second Fallujah, where fighters held the city and allowed themselves to become decisively engaged during the assault on the city by US soldiers and Marines during April of 2007.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Chechen fighters held their ground during a tenacious and almost suicidal defense of Grozny in 1999 and 2000, when Russian forces killed thousands of irregular fighters in an effort to retake the city.<sup>50</sup> In fact, it seems often to be the case that guerrilla fighters will close with the enemy; fighting in the Waygal Valley of Nuristan has reached the hand-grenade and even arms-length stage repeatedly during 2006-2008.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the breaking of contact is not

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population vs. hiding in terrain; linear vs. nonlinear battlefield geometry). They thereby reduce the distinction between COIN and conventional war to a distinction between regular vs. guerrilla warfare. But that is not the question; the question is one of insurgency vs. conventional warfare (guerrilla fighting being merely one of many tools available to insurgents). In conventional warfare, the support of the population for its army and its goals is largely beyond dispute; contrarily, in an insurgency, that support is precisely the thing that is being contested. In a conventional war a military must fight to produce the result its population desires. In an insurgency, on the other hand, the opponents must fight in a way that persuades the population that the fighting is to the population’s benefit, and that therefore the goal is desirable. In conventional war, the military’s ends are conceived and sanctioned by the population *beforehand*, and the military receives great leeway in selecting the means. In COIN, a military must persuade the population that the ends deserve sanction, and therefore the means deserve support – even as the military is employing the means. This puts severe constraints on the means available. But the real differences are not differences of tactics – all wars require a combination of maneuver and static activity, small patrols and large attacks, and so forth. The real differences are those things that contribute most greatly to public persuasion: discriminate use of force; alleviation of negative consequences; establishment of native governance; economic and social wellbeing. By under-scoping the question and limiting their analysis to a discussion of tactics, the authors’ otherwise brilliant monograph misses the point.

<sup>49</sup> Dr. Donald P. Wright and Colonel Timothy R. Meese, *On Point II: Transition to a New Campaign, the United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom May 2003-January 2005*, (Ft Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008) pp. 344-358.

<sup>50</sup> The actual number of civilian casualties is unknown and hotly disputed. However, most estimates run in the tens of thousands, and it is widely acknowledged that the Russian military operations were indiscriminate and disproportionate in their destruction. This topic is covered nicely in James Hughes’ *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 149-153.

<sup>51</sup> This comment is drawn from the first-hand experiences of the author and his subordinates during their tour in Afghanistan in 2006-7 (author’s personal notes). The close-quarters fighting continued through 2008, per author’s discussions and correspondence with the next area commander, Lieutenant Colonel

at all unique to guerrilla warfare; the conventional maneuver known as “delay” consists of nothing more than seeking to establish and break contact in repetitive fashion. And the remedies suggested by COIN advocates to cope with guerrilla fighting are no less exclusive of conventional warfare: patrolling in small units, ambush, small raids. Far from being exclusive to irregular warfare, these have been the bread-and-butter of light infantry units for many years – even centuries.

From this survey of the debate, we can draw a couple of conclusions. First, COIN and conventional war are not as different as some would lead us to believe. Some significant differences do exist, but it seems that the difference between counterinsurgency and conventional war is more about how a force is employed, rather than what the force’s capabilities are. Furthermore, it seems that the biggest differences therefore are conceptual, rather than practical. The differences tend to be the least at the lowest echelon of organization, but become increasingly stark as one ascends the chain of command. By examining these gaps in more detail, we can construct a more accurate comparison of insurgency and conventional war, one that accounts for the true differences while understanding where the similarities lie.

### ***A Deeper Comparison***

The most fundamental distinction between conventional war and counterinsurgency is not in their characteristics, which as we have seen can be very similar, but in their very nature. A conventional war is a military campaign; the primary goal is to use military forces to defeat other armed groups, and thereby bend the

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William B. Ostlund (personal correspondence of the author), as well as published official reports. See for example US Army, *15-6 Investigation and Findings – Vehicle Patrol Base Wanat Complex Attack and Casualties*, 13 July 2008, dated 13 August 2008, accessed at <http://www.stripes.com/08/nov08/wanat01.pdf> on 9 March 2009.

adversary to your will. On the other hand, a counterinsurgency is a campaign of persuasion, in which the primary aim is not to destroy the enemy but to convince the population to support the government. In conventional war, fighting is the military's purpose and method. In counterinsurgency, the task is to create an argument of deeds and words that will persuade the people to side with the government; fighting is merely one of the available tools.

From this distinction we can derive many other observations about the differences in character. If counterinsurgency is a campaign of persuasion, in which military force is but one of the persuasive tools available, then COIN is not completely different from conventional war, but a superset of it. It is conventional war –at times- embedded in a broader context; it is “conventional war, plus.” As the COIN advocates say, COIN is not a lesser included contingency of conventional war; in fact, conventional war turns out to be a lesser included contingency of counterinsurgency. Those things that we do in conventional war are also necessary skills for counterinsurgency. What is different is how we apply those skills, and what effect we intend to achieve. That is, *what* we do is less distinctive than why and how we do it. It is not the instrument of the campaign that matters, but rather how it is employed.

The concept of a counterinsurgency campaign as a campaign of persuasion leads us to find a second difference between military and counterinsurgency campaigns: campaign design. Military campaigns usually begin with a desired political objective, derive a supporting physical end state for a campaign, and by a process of backwards planning create a series of dynamic moves that will force the enemy's military forces to capitulate. Military campaigns therefore consist of offensives and defenses, advances,

and attacks to gain and control territory or to destroy equipment; that is, they are usually enemy-focused or terrain-focused. Counterinsurgency campaigns proceed entirely differently. They begin by establishing a framework of contact with a given population, and then fostering this relationship to bring the population into the government's camp, even as they use the relationship to begin attacking and destroying enemy forces. That is, the key in a counterinsurgency campaign is not primarily terrain, or even the enemy; the key is the population. If traditional military operations are classified as either terrain or enemy focused, COIN is population focused.

In order to execute a population focus, counterinsurgency campaigns proceed in a series of steps. Although these have been widely described (FM 3-24 describes the process as "clear, hold, build"), all of the descriptions come down to a couple of basic principles: the first step is to separate the enemy from the people, and keep him away. The second step is to take actions to connect the people to the government. And the third step is to transform the environment by creating institutions and infrastructure that will make the country less susceptible to insurgency in future.<sup>52</sup>

Separating the enemy from the people is a process that almost always requires military action. Although there are psychological methods and non-kinetic methods of getting the enemy away from the people, it is often (even frequently) the case that kinetic military activity is required. This military activity can vary greatly in type, scale and magnitude. For example, the clearing required in the second battle of Fallujah was a

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<sup>52</sup> This elaboration of the three-part COIN method was created by then-Colonel (now Brigadier General) John M. "Mick" Nicholson, then commanding 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division.



brigade level operation.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the activity can also be more subtle – forcing the enemy to flee is often enough, and merely requires occupation of his area, mixed with small defensive and offensive actions. In either event, the skills used to push the enemy away from the people are precisely the same as the ones needed to fight conventional war: offense, defense, reconnaissance. The specific tactics are the same, too: night attacks, attack by fire, raids, ambushes, reconnaissance patrols. The proportion of certain techniques and tactics can vary, but both styles of war require a full repertoire of offensive operations and defenses. This means that if a technique or system is needed for conventional warfare, it is almost certainly useful in counterinsurgency. Infantry, armor, artillery, close air support, attack helicopters - all are needed or desirable in both COIN and conventional war. COIN advocates sometimes assert that these weapons and tactics are inappropriate for COIN, but they miss the mark in one of two ways: they display a predilection with the non-kinetic sides of COIN; or they display an assumption that counterinsurgency can only occur in a very limited range of possibilities.

The requirement to use these capabilities in counterinsurgency forces the integration of various arms of maneuver ever lower. If conventional warfare is about the integrated application of combat arms on a large scale, COIN is about the same thing, *plus* the requirement to integrate them at a low echelon of command.

But the fact that the same techniques and systems are used in both counterinsurgency and conventional war does not mean they are the same thing. In fact, it merely means that the same force can do both, if employed correctly. Proper employment depends on the specific considerations placed on counterinsurgency forces.

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<sup>53</sup> Wright Meese, *On Point II*, pp. 344-358. In fact, the entirety of the book's Chapter 8, "Combined Arms Operations in Iraq: AL FAJR, The Liberation of Fallujah," describes large-scale warfare in the context of the Iraq counterinsurgency; see pp. 313-364.

In any type of war, soldiers must kill enemy forces -in conventional war in order to achieve a usually physical objective, and in COIN in order to push the enemy away from the people so they can “hear” the government’s “argument.” But in COIN the way that “pushing” is done has a profound impact on the government’s ability to take advantage of the space created and connect the people to the government. For example, if a force kills many of the enemy, but in the process creates collateral damage that alienates the population, little is gained. Likewise, if a force kills a number of insurgents who have been plaguing an intimidated population, but the killing is done so precisely that it is invisible to the local people, the persuasive effect of the kinetic activity is lost. This means that in COIN, precision engagement is a key capability. The ability to hit the right target with no collateral damage is important.

Precision does not just require precise munitions, but also exquisite intelligence, precise target selection, and persistent surveillance. These capabilities are needed in precision conventional warfare, too, but what changes is the nature of the information collected. In a conventional war, the arrayal and movement of enemy forces gives warning of enemy intentions and capabilities; and these movements are identifiable by physical means; and an analysis of enemy doctrine or historical patterns can illuminate what those movements intend. But irregular forces depend less on identifiable movements of identifiable forces, and more on the surreptitious movement of small groups who are often indistinguishable from –indeed, may be a part of- the general population. Whereas in conventional war we need to detect *things* in time and space, in counterinsurgency we need to detect intentions and plans. Conventional war, therefore, tends to rely on imagery intelligence and various forms of moving target indication.

Counterinsurgency, on the other hand, relies more on human intelligence and signals collection.

After the intelligence is collected, it must be analyzed in a method appropriate to the form of war. Conventional fights require a form of analysis that can deconstruct systems; and can deduce from them the unmade decisions of the enemy, and the physical indicators that will reveal what those decisions are when they are made; and then can find the specific nodes whose destruction will most likely damage the working of the opposing force; and can then find what vulnerabilities exist to strike that force. The analytic system for a counterinsurgency is far different. Usually, the guerrilla force seeks to avoid nodal organizations that create interdependence, and use instead resilient cell-based structures. The cells are connected very much less by physical indicators or means than by social networks and influence patterns. Consequently, COIN analysis relies much less on systems analysis methodologies than on network and social analyses. These analytics require different skills, skills that include cultural awareness, language, and social sciences.

The security zones established in a population-centric COIN fight require routine logistical operations along a standard line of communication (LOC) inside the established zone. These zones are frequently not contiguous with the support bases that provide them sustenance, and therefore logistical operations must frequently be exposed to attack by ambush or other guerrilla means. Indeed, this has historically been the problem of military forces engaged in counterinsurgency: the force seeks to preserve as many soldiers as possible to place in action to establish and maintain the security zone, because this defines how much population one is able to focus on. The enemy, by striking at soft

logistical convoys and fixed locations that are needed to sustain the security force, seeks to draw combat forces away from the security zone to protect the logistical forces that supply them; he tries to make the counterinsurgent force divert more combat power to protecting the logistical organization that are sustaining the force than to conducting combat operations. The force begins to exist to protect its ability to sustain itself – a classic self-licking ice cream cone. Breaking out of this dynamic is key to counterinsurgency operations. This requires, at base, logistical units that can sustain and protect themselves in most combat situations. This requirement for self-protecting logistical organizations represents a significant new approach to logistics, if not in terms of organization and materiel, or even doctrine, at least in terms of actual practice. For too long, US forces have assumed the existence of a rear area that obviates the need for logisticians to fight, which has allowed the required skills to atrophy and permitted the necessary equipment to be diverted to other organizations.<sup>54</sup>

After separating the people and the insurgents, the next step in a COIN campaign is to connect the people to the government. This is largely work of nonmilitary organizations, and it is often argued that the military should not become involved in it. But the “smorgasbord effect” makes that wishful thinking. We cannot artificially divide the steps into neat sequences. The combat aspects of “separating the enemy and the people” often take place in geographical and temporal proximity to the “softer” steps required for connecting the people to the government. The three “steps” of counterinsurgency are not sequential, but often run in parallel and always in a functionally interrelated way. For example, the techniques and programs for connecting

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<sup>54</sup> See comments by General Peter Schoomaker, then US Army Chief of Staff, quoted in “Army’s Top General Visits Ft Jackson, Urges ‘Warrior First’ Training,” *Augusta Chronicle*, November 20, 2003, accessed at [http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/112103/met\\_124-5345.shtml](http://chronicle.augusta.com/stories/112103/met_124-5345.shtml) on 9 March 2009.

people to their government are frequently an essential part of separating the people from the insurgents. Moreover, the interplay of the two steps is so close that it is tremendously unwieldy to place the two functions under separate organizations; at least some of the time, the reconstruction steps we see in “step two” will need to happen during “step one” – and therefore under the control of, and most likely by, the unit performing step one. Therefore, military units will also need to have some ability to connect the people to the government.

Connecting the people to the government is a complex task that combines physical and intangible efforts. Usually, it involves the provision of some sort of material benefit to the population, and in such a way that it draws those people into the orbit of the government. Frequently, this includes essential services such as water, education, and electricity.<sup>55</sup> This means the military must be prepared to provide or arrange for a wide variety of essential services. In conventional war the military requires many of these services for itself, so it is not unusual to find conventional logistics and engineering organizations with all the materiel and expertise necessary to perform these tasks. What is needed here is rarely a new organization, but rather a better understanding of how to employ an existing organization to achieve effects in the counterinsurgency effort. For example, the monies spent to establish logistical support during a counterinsurgency operation use the normal procedures and structures as during conventional warfare. However, if during a counterinsurgency campaign the directors channel these contracts in venues that will provide a salutary counterinsurgency effect, then a conventional warfare

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<sup>55</sup> Major General (now, General) Peter W. Chiarelli and Major Patrick R. Michaelis, “Winning the Peace: The Requirement for Full-Spectrum Operations,” *Military Review*, July-August 2005, pp. 4-16.

capability lends itself very well to COIN – and it costs nothing but insight on the part of the logistical leadership.

To be sure, some specific organizations will be needed, such as Civil Affairs units. But these units already exist and have a prominent role in the conduct of conventional military campaigns; their arrival and employment does not distinguish COIN from conventional war. What is different is the prominence of their contribution to military efforts, the amount of priority given to their operations, and the centrality of their effort to the overall success of the mission. But this requires little change in organization, only a change in planning and mentality among leaders and staffs.

Connecting the government to the people requires significant information operations (IO). The prominence of IO is often cited as a chief discriminator of COIN from conventional warfare – and indeed it is hard to think of conventional fights where the achievement of objectives comes directly as the result of a propaganda campaign. On the other hand, information operations are not central to counterinsurgency operations; they are its main feature – they *are* COIN operations. Inasmuch as a counterinsurgency force is presenting an argument to the population, everything they say or do, and how they say or do it carries a message, whether inadvertently or purposefully. All the IO efforts in the world cannot help if the command does not internalize the rhetorical power of its actions and words. Nothing is more common than the frustration of an IO officer who is invited in after the plan is developed and asked to “sprinkle IO dust on it.” Counterinsurgency campaigns require not operations orders with information annexes, but information plans with operations plans that support the message. This is, significantly different from what is required in conventional war. However, this new

orientation requires no new structures, nothing other than the conception in the mind of the commander and the understanding among the staff that the relationship between IO and fighting is reversed in counterinsurgency.

On the other hand, there is a requirement to physically produce and promulgate our messages, to complement the “propaganda of the deed” that we engage in by our entire operation.<sup>56</sup> Printing presses, radio stations, and other means of broadcasting information are required, and in larger quantities and at lower echelons than commonly found in a conventional force. But even more than that, COIN requires the procedures and the mentality to release message promulgation authority to the proper echelon of command for effective employment. COIN forces must be focused on and empowered to communicate directly with the people.

The second step of COIN, connecting the people to the government, is critical, but perhaps the most difficult; it involves recreating a political culture so that the government has the capability and the intention to hear, aggregate, and satisfy the needs of the people. Conventional warfare advocates claim that this sort of nation building, especially the attitudinal reform, is a Sisyphean task when we are lucky, but more often simply impossible; a military force that tries is on a fool’s errand. This is irrelevant. Doing this sort of thing is an inevitable aspect of any form of warfare. Any time a society is overwhelmed and its state organs defeated, it is necessary to replace their role in society. Engaging in limited fashion in institution-building is necessary even in conventional war, even if only to create the conditions to close the campaign. The organs that do this work vary in every case: sometimes, conventional militaries have done it; other times, non-

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<sup>56</sup> Joseph E.O. McMillan and Christopher G. Cavoli, “Countering Global Terrorism,” *Strategic Challenges: America’s Global Security Agenda*, (Dulles VA: Potomac Books, 2008) pp. 23-24.

governmental agencies have; and still other times, comprehensive interagency governmental efforts have done this work. But it always has to be done, whether in counterinsurgency or not. And it is always difficult to isolate the military from the task – the geographical and temporal proximity of this work to combat is simply too variable, and often too close.

But connecting the people to the government does involve one, very specifically military task: raising, training and mentoring indigenous security forces. In COIN, the establishment of a well-trained and employed military is a fundamental requirement; so much so, that many observers say that only indigenous forces are capable of truly winning a counterinsurgency.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, it is a specific requirement with specific methods; conventional forces can do it, but not very well without specific training. It is something required specifically and uniquely in COIN.

The third step of a COIN campaign is to transform the environment through a program of infrastructure development and institution building.<sup>58</sup> This is a non-military endeavor. The long-term effort needed to establish new nations is not compatible with the efforts needed to stabilize post-conflict areas, to govern conquered populations, or to calm and persuade people to side with the government. Inasmuch as that is the case, the long term institution building aspects of counterinsurgency can and must be left of non-military organizations; military functions and organizations are as likely to be counterproductive as anything. However, the military cannot be entirely ignorant of the efforts to come, because it must plan the short- and mid-term efforts in step two in such a way that they will not prejudice the execution of the long-term efforts of step three.

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<sup>57</sup> John Nagl, *Institutionalizing Adaptation: It's Time for a Permanent Army Advisor Corps*, The Future of the US Military Series, Center for a New American Security, June 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Nicholson, Op. cit.



This comparison of differences and similarities leads us to some conclusions about counterinsurgency and conventional warfare. Counterinsurgency must be approached as a persuasive effort intended to sway a population. Conventional war is a violent fight that largely sets aside public opinion. However, both forms of war involve a combination of combat and non-violent methods. The form of the combat and the proportion of methods employed cannot be predicted, because the situation will not be static; the enemy will choose from all available methods to pursue his goals. This means any force in any fight must be prepared for operations ranging from the most benign all the way to major high-intensity warfare. Therefore, the materiel and methods needed will vary with location, and cannot be predicted. However, the tools used are less important than how they are employed. This suggests that the key to having an all-purpose force is conceptual – almost any force can win a counterinsurgency as long as the campaign is properly conceived and executed. However, a force that is unprepared for high-end warfare cannot win in a conventional fight. Therefore, it is best to build a conventional force that is also capable of performing COIN. If that force is optimized for a precision style of conventional war, this will help when it is applied to COIN; so will a couple of conventionally-unneeded specialty forces. But what is absolutely imperative is to develop a leadership cadre that can employ the force correctly, and to develop the institutional agility to move through various modes of warfighting easily.

Our army is already far down the path of adopting precision-warfare conventional operations. Some small additions and changes will make this a very suitable tool for a wide range of operations. Developing leaders who know how to use that tool is the harder task.

### ***Modifying the Existing Force***

The first requirement for any force is to be competent and effective in waging kinetic warfare. More specifically, the force must be able to wage a specific style of high-intensity warfare, a style that will develop skills that will overlap more easily with the methods of counterinsurgency warfare. In this sense, a modification of our high-end combat doctrines and techniques to make them more useful in COIN can go a long way in achieving multipurpose utility.

First, the force must be prepared to engage in precision warfare: it must be equipped, trained and possess the doctrines necessary for the discriminating application of force at all levels. This means that the force must possess systems and procedures to collect and manage intelligence at the lowest level, so that targeting can move through the shortest loop possible between sensor and shooter. Small units should possess collection management and analytical sections at the lowest level -- battalion and even company. In addition to this, the force must have doctrines to make the management of intelligence travel both up and down the echelons of command. Previously, information and finished intelligence only flowed downward, from higher to lower echelons. It was inconceivable that lower echelons would be able to produce better human intelligence (the stuff of national level spying activity), signals intelligence (the province of centrally tasked assets), or imagery intelligence (the province of strategic overhead assets), so the “pipes” in the intelligence architecture operated in a top-down, “push” fashion. Today, however, the technical capabilities of front line units and their access to target populations have pushed the ability to collect valuable information to ever lower levels. Furthermore, since the analyst-collector link is tightest at this level, the refinement of

tasking and the iterative processes necessary to produce finished intelligence are resident at the lowest level, too. The ability of small units to assemble accurate and relevant pictures of their battle space has never been higher. This indicates that there must be an impetus in intelligence doctrine to send intelligence from the bottom, up.

But to truly unleash the potential suggested here, we also need to disaggregate the single intelligence cycle that characterized previous set-piece style conventional warfare, and to push to lower echelons those cycles that can be done better at lower levels. This does not end the role of higher headquarters; rather, they should specialize instead in collecting intelligence by methods that remain beyond the capability of smaller units, and to complement the lower units' collection efforts as the time comes. To do this, it is necessary to empower with equipment and manpower the lower level units that are now increasingly able to contribute fully to the intelligence picture. Men and equipment must be pushed to those levels. Second, and perhaps more important, a flexibility of doctrinal application needs to be introduced into the intelligence corps. There will be times when the decentralization of the intelligence cycle is essential – but there will also be times when decentralization would be deleterious to the mission, both in COIN and high-end warfare. Adding a degree of mission analysis and flexibility to the conception of intelligence cycles and the procedures that they drive would go a long way toward creating overlap between conventional and counterinsurgency methods.

The second aspect to achieving a universally applicable intelligence system is to reapportion the commitment we make to the various sub-disciplines within the intelligence corps. Counterinsurgency relies heavily on the requirement to discern intentions of the enemy and his plans, and much less on the physical indicators that an

attack is coming; after all, the enemy is frequently not identifiable by visual means, and in any event tends to move in smaller elements to perform smaller scale attacks. Therefore, in COIN, we tend to require signals intelligence and human intelligence, that is, disciplines that reveal intentions even when physical indicators are absent or inconclusive. This represents a shift from our past several dozen years of high-intensity preparation, but reflects the fact that COIN intelligence disciplines are rising in importance in high-intensity warfare, too. Previously in high-intensity warfare, we relied heavily on imagery and other means of detecting physical deployment of forces. The enemy's intent to attack was taken for granted, and the existence of strong doctrine and methodologies on the part of our Soviet enemy made his operational intentions discernible through our observation of his dispositions. This is no longer the case in conventional warfare, where our current and potential adversaries seem not to be explicitly disposed toward attacking us, and where their doctrine is not sufficiently sophisticated, elaborated or inculcated in the force to make observation of force disposition as valuable as it once was. Even if a doctrine-based conventional adversary were to arise again, it probably would not be with as strict an adherence to centralized command and control and doctrinal execution as the Soviet war machine was intended to be. All of this means that finding things is no longer enough even in conventional warfare; disciplines that allow us to understand the enemy's intents and plans are more important now than before. Those disciplines are signals and human intelligence, the same disciplines that are critical in counterinsurgency warfare.

The third aspect of intelligence that needs to be developed to take advantage of the overlap in COIN and conventional sets is the notion that all soldiers are sensors. This

is a critical aspect of COIN intelligence development, where the small shifts in daily situations can portend large events, or at least provide the context needed to conduct precise operations without making mistakes. Taking advantage of this sort of constant soldier observation could greatly benefit conventional operations, too. However, this will require not just sensitization of soldiers to this task, but also the two-way architecture described above, which will allow bottom-up, operational information to get into analytic efforts at all echelons. Such a system, wherein soldier-derived information travels both ways for the purposes of intelligence production, would be valuable in both COIN and conventional warfare.

In order to create a multipurpose force, then, the first modification needs to be in the intelligence systems. We need to increase SIGINT and HUMINT capabilities; add analytic capabilities at lower levels; inculcate an attitude that all soldiers are sensors; and, critically, develop architecture and doctrine that disaggregates the centralized intelligence cycle into complementary intelligence efforts, and creates a two-way architecture for the dissemination of both information and finished intelligence. Such modifications to our current system, far from short-changing conventional efforts in favor of COIN specialization, will actually improve our ability to wage both forms of war. Furthermore, the changes needed are inexpensive to implement; the infrastructure of the system remains largely the same as our legacy force, but merely changes its operation. The force structure differences required are minimal.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Adding a two man intel cell to every maneuver company in every maneuver battalion in every maneuver brigade in our objective force would require fewer than 600 soldiers. Additional equipment would be even easier to acquire. The proliferation of commercially available low level signals intelligence collection platforms is such that units even now are increasingly adopting the practice of buying off-the-shelf items for these purposes.

The second aspect of precision warfare is precision engagement – hitting what you seek to hit with an appropriate amount of force, conserving ammunition, concentrating force at the overwhelming place, and minimizing collateral damage. In COIN precision engagement is necessary, while in conventional war it is a stylistic and doctrinal choice. However, by choosing a doctrine that emphasizes precision, a conventional force can become more applicable in COIN. This is a choice that has already been made in the US military, and our doctrines and equipment have already led us in directions that stress ever more precision. As our weapons possess the intrinsic accuracy necessary to allow precision engagement, we can be ready for either conventional or irregular war.

The third thing needed to rationalize a conventional force for COIN is to eliminate the “softness” of the rear area. Hardening our logistics units and preparing them to fight is a development already well underway in the US Army, and following this track is an important thing to do. This will require some equipment, but mostly training and mentality changes among the logistics corps.

The fourth modification required to make our conventional force have a standing capability for irregular warfare is also the hardest: creating a standing advisory capability. The requirement to establish and advise indigenous security forces is the military’s only necessary contribution to the second step of COIN –connecting the people to the government- and yet we continue to have an *ad hoc* approach to the problem.

The details of a standing advisory corps are hard to pin down; like any predictive exercise, we are unable to foresee what equipment, what doctrine, and what training the indigenous army will possess, or will need. It seems clear that the force would need to be

able to establish and train tactical staffs, commanders, and small units in the basics of intelligence, maneuver, and logistics. There is also a requirement to train and mentor at the operational and national levels, in order to develop the indigenous army's ability to plan and sustain itself as an institution. Although the US Special Forces were originally intended to perform the tactical-level training and advisement functions, over time they have become insufficiently specialized in this function; were insufficiently focused on the mission;<sup>60</sup> and in any event were too small and incorrectly organized to equip and train large conventional indigenous military forces.<sup>61</sup> Something more robust, and organized to focus on a conventional military force, is needed.<sup>62</sup> The US Army's central training centers could provide a model for the sort of force required. They are already organized and trained to mentor large conventional forces, and are focused carefully on the critical systems any military organization requires to survive. Whatever the form, however, some sort of standing advisory capability is needed to help our conventional force be prepared for irregular war.

In summary, then, the force structure trajectory the US Army is currently following can be entirely adequate for counterinsurgency. With some modifications – modifications that will benefit both the way we fight both COIN and conventional war-

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<sup>60</sup> The tendency of “vanilla” Special Forces to concentrate on “Direct Action” at the expense of their other four core missions (of which advising foreign forces could be considered part of two) has been widely commented upon. See for example, Matthew Irwin, “How Not to Wage Counterinsurgency Warfare,” *Foreign Policy Journal*, January 18, 2005, accessed at [http://www.foreignpolicyforum.com/view\\_article.php?aid=232](http://www.foreignpolicyforum.com/view_article.php?aid=232) on 9 March 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Indeed, except in the smallest of fights, such as El Salvador in the 1980s, it is hard to think of a time when the US engaged in counterinsurgency on such a small scale that the indigenous force to be created was small enough to be handled by SF.

<sup>62</sup> Something on the model of the observer/controller cadres at our training centers would be more useful; they are organized to “fall in on” all parts of a tactical unit and its staff, and are trained specifically as advisors and evaluators, vice fighters. For foreign advisement, however, these “observer/controllers” would need to be appropriate people. They would need to be: culturally literate; innovative problem solvers who do not rely on doctrines that may not apply; and well-versed in kinetic and non-kinetic “persuasion” activities.

the force will be very suitable for all types of warfare. But this will be true only if the force is employed correctly. This puts the emphasis on proper selection, training, and development of those who will employ the force.

### ***The Human Factor***

The differences between counterinsurgency and conventional war, as we have seen, are conceptual and get bigger as we ascend the echelons of organization. At the lowest levels of organization, the differences are the smallest: a machine gunner does largely the same thing in COIN as he does in a conventional fight. However, as one begins to move up echelons of command, the divergences begin immediately, and increase as we go higher. The decisions about the use of force made by an operational level commander are quite different in COIN as compared to conventional warfare. It will be helpful to examine this at three levels: first, what a simple soldier needs to do; second, what a small unit tactical leader needs to do; third, what an operational commander needs to do.

The most important contribution a soldier can bring to a counterinsurgency effort is mastery in his basic occupational specialty. That is, soldiers in a flexible force must first and foremost be trained to perform their conventional warfare tasks. There are some things that a soldier must be able to do differently for counterinsurgency than for conventional warfare, however. First, as we have already seen, each soldier needs to be a “sensor,” an intrinsic part of the information collecting apparatus of the Army. Second, he must understand not only what he must do, but what he must *not* do; that is, he must



understand how to fulfill the dictum, “do no harm.”<sup>63</sup> This requires a sense of restraint in our soldiers -- but restraint is not necessarily entirely new: it is born of discipline, already a core value in conventional militaries. “Doing no harm” also requires that the soldier know what “harm” might be. The obvious answers –collateral injury and damage, for example- are easy enough to teach the soldier; but other forms of potential harm –those rooted in cultural and religious issues, for example – are more difficult to plan and prepare for prospectively. Basic knowledge delivered in the brief predeployment period can only be effective if the soldier has already been inculcated with the idea that there are some restraints he will have to place on his behavior in any culture; that is, the soldier must be taught from his earliest service that wherever he might deploy, there will be certain *faux pas* that could damage the mission and he must avoid. Thus indoctrinated, it is merely a matter of providing theater-specific cultural instruction once the theater is identified.

So, the basic requirements for a soldier do not change too much. He must be able to perform his occupational task; must be prepared to fight and kill in the precise way advocated in doctrine, must understand his role as a critical part of the information gathering architecture; must display discipline and restraint in his actions; and must have a bit of cultural knowledge so as not to give gratuitous offense. If a soldier in a conventional unit can do these things, then the rest is up to his leaders. Those leaders are the key.

First level tactical leaders are critical. Because of their constant contact with the population, they have powerful ability to do good or bad for the mission. These

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<sup>63</sup> General James Mattis, *Letter to All Hands*, March 23 2004, accessed at [http://faculty.washington.edu/sidles/ISH/Mattis\\_message.pdf](http://faculty.washington.edu/sidles/ISH/Mattis_message.pdf) on 9 March 2009.

“strategic corporals” must be well prepared. In conventional war, the decision to apply force has already been made, and the corporal-level leader need only instruct his men when and where to begin. In a counterinsurgency, on the other hand, the decision to use force has to be made again every time the occasion arises, and the situation is usually such that the decision will be taken by a corporal on a street corner. So the first step in the development of a strategic corporal is to give him an understanding when and what level of force can be used. This must be treated both as a legal question, as well as an operational issue, with costs and benefits that must be balanced. Such a complex topic exceeds our normal notion of training, and becomes an educational requirement. It must be raised and pursued in both formal coursework for junior non-commissioned officers, as well as in unit training and development programs.

After the decision to apply force is made, the strategic corporal is now in a position to decide how to apply that force for maximum effect. Again, in a conventional war, the effect is pretty clear: destroy the enemy force, and use the firepower necessary to do so. In an irregular fight, the question is more complex: “What is the persuasive effect I desire to achieve by using force?” To formulate and answer this question, a junior leader must be familiar with tactical-level counterinsurgency theory and practice, and have a good grounding in the use of action to advance informational goals. Again, this is less a matter of training than education, and so addressing COIN theory and IO need to become an integral part of the junior leader development programs for non-commissioned officers and junior commissioned officers.

The strategic corporal also needs to know how to communicate, especially across cultures, in order to move from conventional warfare into counterinsurgency. Although

his actions will be the first message a population receives from our forces, he also needs to be able to vocalize and convey these messages. He needs to be able to identify the power brokers and opinion makers in a given setting, and then how to approach them in the manner needed to convey the message he seeks to convey. Yet again, developing this sophisticated sort of physical and verbal understanding and communications ability is a requirement for our leader development institutions.<sup>64</sup>

A strategic corporal also needs to know how to operate both independently and as a nested member of a larger organization. He may be required to operate entirely on his own and unsupervised, but then may need to shift and operate as a closely integrated part of a larger operation. We have already spent decades mastering the art of training men to operate as part of a larger organization; now we must focus some effort on training our most junior leaders to operate unsupervised. For this, our junior leaders must be carefully selected and developed to have a sense of judgment and maturity, so that they can handle situations that were unanticipated and in which they'll receive little guidance. This requires developing and enforcing moral values and a sense of moral purpose; training on values is critical, as is rapid punishment for violations. A good set of shared values, observed in all circumstances, is not only a good way to get good performance in odd situations, but is also the best way to avoid "doing harm."

It is important to note that "strategic corporals" might not be corporals. In some situations, it is indeed the fire team or the squad that forms the first line of decision-making. In other situations, though, it may be at a higher level that our operations are

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<sup>64</sup> Barak A. Salmoni and Paula Holmes-Eber, *Operational Culture for the Warfighter* (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2008). This innovative publication seeks to create a system for analyzing foreign cultures in order to derive operationally relevant information. More important, it is written for an audience of junior non-commissioned officers – perhaps the only such publication this author has come across.

first aggregated. So, the skills and attributes noted above are required of all our junior tactical leaders – sergeants, lieutenants, and captains. Because the possibilities at the tactical level are both endless and unforeseeable, these leaders need to know *how* to decide what to do, not specifically what it is they should do. They do not require rote knowledge of tactical “plays,” but rather the talent and skills necessary to create innovative solutions in any and all situations. As opposed to selecting individuals who can master a canon of knowledge, we must develop individuals that can develop the canon. Furthermore, those thinking and problem-solving skills must be explicitly developed through training, and recognized by the promotion system. And, in addition to simple problem solving, our leaders must possess a certain intercultural facility, since the problems they will be trying to solve will be among a population in a country overseas. So, our most important thing is no longer training our leaders, but selecting and developing them properly, in order that they possess: a certain degree of native intelligence and curiosity; problem solving insight; a passing familiarity with diverse cultures and locations; and communications skills.

Notwithstanding the evident importance of the “strategic corporal,” it is important not to neglect the higher echelons. COIN advocates frequently speak about the desirability –indeed, the requirement- to decentralize decision-making and execution authority to extremely low levels. As a consequence, they often (and rightly) advocate a focus on junior leader training. However, low level actions, while they may have strategic repercussions, cannot be a strategy unto themselves. Local success is not useful if it is not couched in a larger plan that will tie all the local successes into a coherent whole. It is all too common in counterinsurgency to find small unit leaders proud of their

great local success, while suffering frustration that their success is not sufficiently supported or exploited, or tied into a larger strategy for victory.<sup>65</sup> So, while COIN is a fight of small units and decentralized, this does not mean that the weight of our training and education efforts can be solely focused at our lowest level leaders. This is even more so when we consider the effect of heuristic learning on individuals. A senior officer, isolated by distance, time, and echelons of command from the consequences of his local and strategic errors, is less likely to learn as quickly as the company grade officer who is faced the results of his mistakes every day. Therefore, it is arguably more important for the senior officer to arrive at the fight with a strong understanding of what needs to be done. To modify our current conventional force so they can easily transition to counterinsurgency, it is critical to educate senior officers how to wage various types of war.

Where to begin is a bit of a question. It is difficult in most counterinsurgency operations to differentiate among the levels of warfare, to determine where the tactical level ends and the operational begins. In many wars, operational decisions begin at the general officer level. But in Afghanistan, for example, brigade level commanders who had responsibility for sixteen provinces were clearly working at the operational level of war. And it is at the operational level that the demands placed on a leader begin to change significantly. Therefore, the skills and attributes that we need to develop should begin at the field grade officer level.

There are three new skills required in field grade and general officers that are fundamental to establishing the capability to employ a conventional force in

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<sup>65</sup> Erik Malmstrom, "Losing the Waygul Valley: Tactical Victories and Strategic Failures in Northeastern Afghanistan," *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November/December 2008, pp. 42-47, accessed at [http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/1108/PennGaz1108\\_feature2.pdf](http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/1108/PennGaz1108_feature2.pdf) on 9 March 2009.

counterinsurgency. First, commanders must be able strike the proper balance and interaction between combat operations with non-kinetic activities in order to create a persuasive effect on a population. Second, commanders must understand the technical and procedural aspects of conducting information operations. Third, commanders must know how to form teams “on the fly,” including with non-military and non-US partners.

Field grade officers, drawn from the pool noted above, must be able to understand how to determine the nature of a conflict, and to determine what basic approach to take. As this monograph has sought to establish, there are two major such approaches – ones in which kinetic activity dominates and drives the other instruments; and ones in which an informational effort dominates and drives all other contributions. Designing operational approaches in each such situation is not simple, but is a skill that can be taught and developed in our middle -level staff courses. Most of the instruction in those courses has traditionally focused on how to fight a known war; conceptual questions regarding the nature of war were left for other, advanced, “thinker” courses. This must now be reversed.

Our senior officers must be exposed to and indoctrinated in the various forms of warfare, on an equal basis with high-end conventional war-fighting. Not only should they be students of the large tank battles of WWII and the set piece fights of the American Civil War, but they should become familiar with small wars and small war theory, they would know about ongoing and recent counterinsurgency actions; they should be familiar with and comfortable with irregular warfare. This significant educational requirement is ideally the product of a lifetime of study. But we need a flexible force sooner than that, and since it is senior officers who set the tone and design

the campaigns whose features later become doctrine, it is critical to begin educating our senior officer corps in irregular warfare as soon as possible. This applies not only to our field grade corps, who are beginning to gain this education through a revamped professional education system, but also those general officers who have already passed through the last of their professional education opportunities. It does little good to have any echelon ready for counterinsurgency if that above it is not.

The second major skill required of senior officers is the ability to plan and execute information operations. There are two aspects to this: technical and conceptual. The technical aspect of information operations is by far the simplest, and many senior officers have already become well versed in the techniques and procedures for promulgating our message. This education and training needs to continue, and should be a progressive effort in order to keep officers abreast of technological changes in the field. Technical IO training should be incorporated at most military courses and institutions.

The conceptual aspect of information operations – what our messages should be – is much more difficult, and much more fundamental to the success of a counterinsurgency mission. To become adept at such decisionmaking, our officers must first and foremost understand the nature of the conflict we are in, something we've already addressed. But second, they must understand the nature of the culture they are going to try to influence. They must understand what themes resonate in that culture, and how that culture sees us. Obviously, it is impossible and undesirable to specialize in all cultures, or to predict accurately what culture we will need knowledge of in future. However, it is possible for our senior officers to become culturally attuned to cultural considerations, and to understand how to analyze another culture. A good start would be

to give senior officers a level of familiarity with foreign cultures and alternative, non-American and non-Western patterns of thought. Senior officers need not become cultural or area experts, but must possess a level of familiarity with other cultures that allows them to deal effectively with the decision-making methodology of partner nations and irregular adversaries, as well as the populations we serve. The ways to do this are many and varied, but fall into three categories: language training and ability; experience in non-US contexts; and formal study. The ways to inject such skills into the force by assignment patterns, promotional preferences, and formal educational systems are many and need not be belabored here. Suffice it to say, this is also a prerequisite for a rapid transformation of the legacy force into an institutionally capable flexible force.

Finally, the third critical skill that must be developed at the field grade level is to integrate operations with unanticipated and dissimilar partners. No longer can commanders rely only on their own teams to execute the operational approaches they design, which in the case of counterinsurgency can require skills, authorities and organizations not resident in military formations. Furthermore, the organizations that can contribute such things may not be subject to or even close to the military's control. Our officers at the field grade level must therefore become expert in forming teams on the fly, rapidly assembling appropriate groups, determining convergence of goals, aims, and methods, and arriving at agreements for integrated, de-conflicted, or at least informed approaches to common goals. This is not something that has historically been developed in our field grade officer corps, which has been trained to the maxim of "Unity of Command," and in whose culture the act of command is a singular, personal responsibility.



Our entire pyramidal force structure has led to a culture of self-contained unit autarky, which has made team-building an internal and long-term process. Moreover, our officers have been taught to develop a sense of eliteness in units they command; but such a culture is fundamentally exclusive, and lessens the likelihood that other contributors might be adopted and integrated quickly. What we expect in the culture of a field grade officer corps must change. Officers must come to understand their role and their teams as shifting complex organizations composed of varying, various parts with a multitude of relationships governing their interaction. This shift requires both a certain personality type and a certain amount of training. Some social skills must be trained into our officers, who heretofore have not been expected to master a vernacular or set of norms outside our institution; how many jokes have we heard or told about how easy it is to spot an Army officer in a crowd, or how unlikely it is for an Army officer to be understood by anybody but another Army officer? In kinetic operations, this cultural isularity can be acceptable, but if a force is to be able to operate in any type of conflict, then our officers need to be broad enough to deal with all the variables involved. This requires some attention to be given to personality type, but more importantly requires some instruction and a great deal of exposure to other institutional and national cultures. Our institutional learning courses must begin to provide behavioral instruction that allows officers to dissect and accommodate their mannerisms to the mannerisms of their interlocutors. Furthermore, our officers must be encouraged to take positions where they will be engaged with non-military and even non-US colleagues, so that they can gain the insights of external viewpoints.

To develop the attributes necessary to achieve the skills listed above, significant development must be devoted to our soldiers and leaders in the long term so that they will make ever better subjects for the development of the skills discussed above.

First, our company grade officers require long term development. After all, they will eventually become our senior officer corps, and will be the ones to decide in the future how to employ the Army we field. The educational system that teaches this cadre of officers must include irregular warfare principles and studies at all levels of instruction. After successful troop command time, the best officers must be culled away to gain various broadening experiences: formal language training; advanced civil schooling; liaison and exchange assignments with foreign militaries; and seconded duties with non-military governmental organizations. Rather than interesting sidelights in otherwise narrow careers, these experiences must be reserved for our very best officers; must be favored in promotion and selection boards; and must be considered the key developmental part of a career that will go beyond lieutenant colonel. A final, critical, thing: should a standing advisory capability be established, it must be made a mainstream assignment – not only for the benefit of the advisor corps and its mission, but because this duty will provide an excellent opportunity to give combat arms officers broadening experiences that will provide them the cultural know-how to conduct operations outside of the conventional framework. Key spots in the advisory mission should be occupied also by our best officers.<sup>66</sup> Considering such positions favorably

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<sup>66</sup> By placing our best officers in advisory positions before they are selected for command of US units, we can achieve multiple benefits: the advisory mission will be well-manned, and will not become a sidelight; and US units will be led by officers with extensive cultural sensitivity, as well as deep understanding of how to integrate US and allied efforts. This idea is being explored by the UK Army; Sir Richard Dannat proposed to use such assignments as a “broadening” opportunity, and one that might “start to embed our deep language and cultural training, not just our current areas of operation, but potential future conflict

during command selection would ensure the best officers sought those assignments, and would provide them cultural and irregular warfare experiences that would be invaluable as they became senior officers.

Non-commissioned officers also will require development in these areas, for while it is the officer who designs the campaign that distinguishes a conventional force's fight as a counterinsurgency, it is the implementation of the NCO that makes the ideas work on the ground. NCO education must immediately begin to add irregular warfare at all levels. Like officer development, NCO patterns of assignment should place the very best in positions where they have significant contact with non-US militaries, and should make such positions discriminatory for rapid advancement and leadership selection. At the NCO level, it is particularly important to add concepts and practice of communicating and interacting with non-US populations. To that end, all soldiers should receive some form of language familiarity training and testing. While there will remain a role for significantly elevated skill levels for some occupational specialties and languages, it is far more important for an irregular warfare capable force to possess some language capability at all levels. The goal is not to replace linguist programs, but merely to reduce the mystery of other languages throughout the force so that being comfortable among non-English speakers migrates from being a specialist skill to being a wider force capability. The cultural insights, receptivity to other patterns of thought, and cross-cultural communications ability that accrue to a person who has studied another language are simply too important to put in the tool bag of the combat arms force to allow

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zones." General Sir Richard Dannat, "The Land Environment – Moving Towards 2018," comments made at Royal United Studies Institute Warfare Conference, 12 June 2008, London; page 7 of transcript.

language to remain a rarefied skill among specialists: the training programs, incentives and requirements for language training must be spread to all portions of the force.

In summary, a few changes made to the selection and development of our leaders can produce a profound change in mentality. Immediate cultural and irregular warfare education among senior officers; systematic education in language, irregular warfare and non-US military assignments for other officers; systematic education in irregular warfare, and language training for our Non-Commissioned Officers and soldiers; will broaden the ability of our force to be employed in either conventional war, counterinsurgency, or any combination in between.<sup>67</sup>

The last critical feature of an all-purpose force is flexibility. While modifications to our current force structure trajectory and our leader development can enable us to organize our force for both conventional war and COIN, it will be irrelevant if we are not able to move quickly from one form of employment to another.

This might be the most difficult change of all. Although we pride ourselves in the flexibility and adaptability of our current force, in reality our flexibility lies mainly in our ability to adjust to changes within the set of problems that we anticipated; that is, as long as the challenges we face are “inside our box,” we can adjust. Jumping from one “box” into another is tougher – but that is the only way to have a conventional force that can also fight counterinsurgency.

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<sup>67</sup> The reader will find many of the ideas here to echo those of Lieutenant General (Retired) Sir John Kiszely, who has written extensively on how to combine and reconcile “warrior culture” with the attributes required of a counterinsurgent in order to achieve leadership for an all-around force. Sir John’s monograph, *Post-Modern Challenges for Modern Warriors*, makes an elegant and cogent argument for significant changes in the culture, rather than the skill sets, of a conventional army that would seek to be capable of counterinsurgency. LtGen Sir John Kiszely, *Post-Modern Challenges for Modern Warriors* (Shrivenham Papers, No. 5, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom: Cranfield, December 2007).

This runs counter to the culture of the US Army today. Our Army, having been raised and trained on a closed set of possibilities (all variations on the theme of conventional war, based on the presumption that the war to be fought would be conventional), possessed a low respect for adaptability or fundamental analysis, and instead rewarded technical analysis and the ability to work as part of a larger system (i.e., obedience and modularity). Without a cultural basis for wide flexibility, it is necessary to begin with a definition and then to determine how to produce flexibility on a wide scale.

Flexibility can be seen as the ability to change what one has planned based on preliminary information, such as planning info or assumption. It involves both an individual conceptual component, as well as a collective and physical component. A unit commanded by an officer who is unable to break himself conceptually away from a premade plan cannot be flexible; likewise, a unit that is unable to digest and execute the changes that a commander conceives also cannot be flexible. Adaptability is the propensity to be consciously, innovatively, and profitably flexible. That is, it is the ability to perceive the need for a different solution, the ability to conceive a new solution, and the ability to implement a new solution – usually on the fly. A flexible unit is not necessarily adaptable; an adaptable unit is not necessarily sufficiently flexible.

In order to be flexible, an organization must primarily be populated by people who are mentally flexible. That is, the commanders must be prepared to stop what they are doing and to change, and the soldiers and subordinates must likewise be willing to accept and execute such changes not as a necessary (or annoying) evil, but as a natural way to do business.

Furthermore, a flexible unit must have the ability to change its organization to match the needs on the ground. It must be able to build and rebuild teams on the fly. That is, it must have the requisite skills common to many various possibilities resident in all parts of the organization, and those skills must be sufficiently standardized to permit rapid team building. A balance must be struck in order to achieve enough standardization to be flexible without creating so much standardization that it begins to define the range of possible solutions and actually becomes a limiting factor in innovation. This is achievable by keeping the standardization of skills at the individual or low-level collective level, and at the level of collective procedures. To be flexible, an organization should share certain basic skills universally thorough out the organization so that it can plug into any other organization within the organization. Additionally, those skills should be the skills that can be most commonly anticipated to be needed in most operational situations – in fact, they can be seen as the building blocks of flexibility. For a combat unit, for example, these skills are often thought of as the “Big Four”<sup>68</sup> – four skills that every man must have, and whose possession will likely be necessary for any solution no matter how innovative, and whose possession will also make possible integration of new teams at the lowest level.

Identifying and codifying such basic skills is a prerequisite for developing a flexible organization. But it is truly the development of a flexible mentality that will enable one to exist. Again, as with all the most important aspects of developing a multipurpose force, this is a matter of leader development.

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<sup>68</sup> In a combat arms unit, for example, the “Big Four” are usually physical fitness, combat lifesaving skills, weapons handling skills, and squad battle drills.

## *Summary*

We must win the wars we're in today. But we must do so in a way that will allow us to emerge from these fights poised to fight and win whatever subsequent wars we will come into. These are sufficiently unknowable that we should prepare a strategy of "minimum regrets,"<sup>69</sup> while still being capable across the variety of possible conflicts. This seems like a large task on the surface. Indeed, it has become common wisdom that it is impossible to create a force sufficiently good at all types of war that it will succeed. This is false. When one strips away all of the supposed differences between irregular and regular warfare, one discovers that there are sufficient commonalities to design a force. Essentially, this base force must be competent at the kinetic forms of warfare; if it can be specialized for precision warfare, so much the better. In addition to this, the members of the force must acquire additional skills in order to be able to apply the force effectively in other forms of war. Specifically, to appropriately modify the existing force we should:

- Equip and train units to the lowest echelon to conduct precision engagements.
- Increase and improve the capability to collect and analyze human and signals intelligence at the tactical level.
- Inculcate the attitude that all soldiers are intelligence collectors in both soldiers and their leaders.
- Modify training for tactical intelligence analysts so that their analytical methods are appropriate for counterinsurgency.
- Harden logistical units by equipping and training them to fight as well as perform their logistics tasks.

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<sup>69</sup> Gray, "Coping With Uncertainty: Dilemmas of Defense Planning," *Comparative Strategy*, No. 27: 2008, pg. 330.

- Train and authorize combat service support organizations to use their capabilities among populations upon whom we wish to have a counterinsurgency effect.
- Equip and authorize tactical units to conduct media operations (e.g., provide radio stations and printing presses).
- Establish a standing advisory capability.
- Train soldiers in the concept to “do no harm.”
- Train junior NCOs in legal and operational costs and benefits of using force during counterinsurgency operations.
- Train junior NCOs in cultural analysis techniques.
- Select junior NCOs on the basis of their potential to operate and solve problems independently.
- Educate company and field grade officers in both conventional and counterinsurgency operations.
- Educate senior officers in counterinsurgency theory and practice.
- Train all officers in the concepts and techniques of information operations.
- Develop in officers at all level the ability to analyze and operate in other cultures.
- Modify education, training and assignment patterns to broaden officers so they understand non-military and non-US partners.
- Add rudimentary language familiarity training at all levels of soldier and officer development, beginning with basic training. Develop a bias for language ability in combat arms promotions and selections.
- Promote operational and conceptual flexibility in all training, education, and development throughout the force – and its supporting bureaucracy.



The force structure changes needed to accomplish the goals enumerated above are minimal, and complementary to current force development plans. The additional skills are mainly conceptual, and are the most pronounced at higher echelons. This is good, because it indicates that the current force can be productively transformed into a force that can win the fights we are in now, and can emerge postured to fight properly in future. And because the main changes needed are conceptual in nature, the cost for doing this transformation can be afforded even within difficult fiscal periods. Finally, the transformation can begin quickly, so as to be relevant in the shortest time.

This is easy to write; however, conceptual changes can be the hardest to effect. Changing minds is rarely easy. The path ahead is visible, and free of obstacles. But it is uphill.

